

THE PRICE OF A WIFE.

THE PRICE OF A WIFE

A Novel.

BY

JOHN STRANGE WINTER,

AUTHOR OF

"BOOTLES' BABY," "THE OTHER MAN'S WIFE," "ONLY HUMAN,"

"AUNT JOHNNIE," "EVERY INCH A SOLDIER,"

"A MAGNIFICENT YOUNG MAN,"

"THE TRUTH-TELLERS," ETC.

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THE PRICE OF A WIFE.

THE PRICE OF A

CHAPTER I.

THAT NIGHT OF GRIEF.

AN old man lay in the big bed dozing fitfully, and in a chair by the great handsome fireplace sat a young woman trying hard to stifle her sobs. They were not the noisy sobs of a person in a temper, not the uncontrolled expression of hysteria, but the long deep-drawn gasping struggles of a soul in bitter pain and anguish.

Would she never stop? Did tears bring no relief to that stricken heart? It would seem not—it would seem not. There was no other sound but those stifled sobs, save only the cinders falling softly on the marble hearth. But after a time—for we cannot weep for ever—the gasping breaths grew more controlled, and the pitiful sobs were hushed into silence; and then Nurse Marion lay back in the big chair thinking deeply.

She had made a mistake in coming into this

house. She had cast the happiness of her life upon one die, and it had turned up—blank. Well, it was hard, hard, yes, and something more than hard; but she had done it all for the best, and she must abide by the consequences of her own act and deed, be they what they might. But it was hard—very hard.

As she sat there, her mind went back over the past ten years, as somehow the human mind is apt to do in times of great and dire trouble. How well she remembered the last summer she had spent at home, the dear old home far away in the heart of the blessed country, which she had since heard sneered at as “provincial” by those who knew not its joys and delights! She was nearly twenty then. What innocent fun had been hers during that long, lovely summer, when, as the daughter of the principal doctor in the neighbourhood, she had joined in all the unostentatious pleasures that such a life affords! Picnics, tennis-parties, musical evenings, jaunts up the river, sewing-meetings at the Rectory, all had been gaiety and pleasure to her, who always took more than half her pleasure with her.

Then death had stepped in, and all was changed. She recalled it so well—more vividly during that

night of grief than during all the years that had come between. Yes, death had stepped in, and, after an illness so short that they had scarcely realized the presence of danger, the handsome, kindly, genial old doctor (who was called old not by reason of his years but because everybody loved him) was taken away and his place knew him no more.

It is one of the most common tragedies of English life that those occupying positions of honour and of distinction do not, like their neighbours across the Channel, trouble themselves as to provision for the morrow. I have always thought that there is too much "trust in Providence" about the English character, too much of the lilies of the field, not in that we neither toil nor spin, but in that we take no thought for the morrow that will come for some of us, if not for all.

In this Dr. Brandon had been no exception to the rule. He had made a large income, and he had spent it—had, in fact, let it slip away with the good-natured ease of a man who finds it hard to say no; and when all was over, and widow and children had to look hard facts fair and square in the face, they realized that the old pleasant days

were gone by for ever, that in the future things would be very different with them, and that there was no longer the good, genial, hard-working doctor to stand between them and starvation.

Starvation, did I say? Oh, well, we do not actually starve, we English people who live on our earnings and take no thought for the morrow; we do not even go to the workhouse, at least not very many of us. Yet, if only a few of us drift thus far, there are hundreds, nay, I should rather say thousands and thousands, of delicately nurtured, proud women who have to do as best they can when they suddenly find themselves thrown upon the world, having nothing upon which they can depend beyond their own poor, untaught, untrained, uncongenial exertions.

So it was with the Brandon family. Nurse Marion recalled it all as she lay there thinking in the darkness—how her mother had looked helplessly from the face of one daughter to the other, and what a pitiful cry had risen to her lips, “What are we to do? How shall we live? What will become of us?”

Well, it was no uncommon story. The widow

suddenly cast from a home of plenty, even of luxury, to existence on a pittance of some sixty pounds a year, soon sank under the burden of poverty and followed the husband whom she had lost. The five girls, of whom Marion was the third, all went different ways in life.

Madge, the eldest of them, entered herself at a London hospital, immediately after her father's death, and when her term of training was over, went off to Australia, where she felt convinced she might best turn her experience to account. Constance, the second girl, went abroad as governess to a Russian family of distinction. I have said that Marion was the third of the five daughters. Of the two who were her juniors, Rosalie went in for music and did fairly well as a singer, and Winifred, the youngest of all, who had remained with her mother to the end, married very young, and so has no more to do with this story.

I have spoken of Marion, as she was called in the world, but at home she had always been called Felicity. She had been named Felicity Marion after a godmother who might reasonably have been expected to do great things for her, and somehow

the quaint name had always stuck to her in preference to the more sober one of Marion.

"I cannot see," said Mrs. Brandon, vexedly, when the girl first set out from home to begin her training as a nurse, "I cannot see why, because you are going to earn your living, you should abandon your own name and act as if it were an advantage to try to lose your identity. Your name is Felicity, and you have always been called Felicity. I do not see that the fact of working need alter that."

"No, dear, no, but Marion is my own name too, and it is a very good, useful, every-day sort of name, well fitted for a nurse," Felicity replied. "I would rather keep my home name for my home people. I shall be much happier as Nurse Marion than I could possibly be as Nurse Felicity. It sounds—oh, well, dear Mother, just a little pretentious, and silly. And I shall be Felicity to you always."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Brandon, with decision: "I shall never call you anything but Felicity."

Poor soul, she had not called her anything for very long, and since she had gone out into the great silence the girl had been always glad that she was known to the world as Nurse Marion. So

she had gone forth from among her kin, so she remained, and it is as Nurse Marion that we find her sobbing bitterly under her breath in the dim light of the sick-room, then sitting crushed and quiet, frozen with a great misery of grief, breaking her heart over the bitter mistakes of her life.

She went back over the past that night as if it were a panorama spread out before her actual vision. How well she could recall her feelings when she found herself alone, strange and not a little shy, the last-joined probationer of a great London hospital! There is something so romantic and alluring to the young mind in the very name of nurse; and yet when a girl fresh from the home atmosphere finds herself fairly started on that particular career, she finds that there is very little gilding on the gingerbread, that it is an existence hard, sordid, and very uncomfortable, and she must endure it uncomplainingly ere she can reckon herself among those who are sometimes called lay sisters of mercy. So it was with Felicity Brandon.

Yet she was a girl of strong will and indomitable courage, and she was fired by a determination to allow no drawbacks, such as discomfort and matters

of distaste, to check her on her way. She was blessed with good health and had a sunny and charming disposition, and her face was as bright as a May morning.

She was a favourite in her hospital—oh, yes, of that there was no doubt. Looking back, she remembered how sorry every one had been to part with her when her three years of training were over. How many little gifts she had received—priceless possessions to one who valued the good opinion of her fellows. How sorry they had all seemed! How many regrets had been spoken, from the great surgeons and physicians down to the youngest probationer who had scarcely got over her awe of her seniors!

And then she had really gone out into the world. Like all grief-stricken minds, hers flew off at a tangent hither and thither in this bitter review of her past. She remembered once going to nurse an old lady in one of the most fashionable West End squares. By some circumstance she had been so unlucky as to offend the butler—an old servant of some twenty years' standing—and he had flatly refused to do anything to serve her. "If Nurse Marion wants coals," was his fiat, "Nurse Marion

can fetch coals; if Nurse Marion requires trays from down-stairs Nurse Marion can fetch trays from down-stairs."

She looked back as if it were yesterday, remembering how contemptuous she had felt where some would have been angry. "If I were to tell Sir Charles what you say," she said to the serving-man, "I don't think you would stay in this house very long. If her ladyship were not so very ill, I should tell Sir Charles; as it is, I am not going to risk my patient's life in order that you may have your deserts."

Why had that man hated her so much? The question was of no vital interest to her that night; the event had been but a small one in her life; and yet she puzzled over it as she sat in the dark, thinking, thinking over the past.

And, after all, he had been sufficiently punished—punished by himself, too. For one day when Lady Anstruther was getting over the worst, a lady called to see Marion. This lady happened to be the wife of the squire of the dear old home where Dr. Brandon had lived and died, and great was her astonishment on being told with a lordly wave of

the hand that visitors for Nurse Marion must go to the area door. .

"Very good," said Lady Mary, who was a person never at a loss for a reply. "Is Sir Charles Anstruther at home? Yes?" Then say that Lady Mary Waring wishes to see him."

The punishment was short and sharp—an hour's notice to clear out of the house where he had lived for twenty years. Nurse Marion remembered distinctly how earnestly she had begged Sir Charles to reconsider his decision, and how entirely she had failed to move him.

"No, nurse," he said; "Williams has shown himself in his true colours, and my wife's life is hanging upon the way in which she is nursed. If her nurses are broken down by want of proper attention, nothing can save her. Pray say no more about it."

After all, they had not been unhappy years. She had met with many kindnesses, had been constantly at work, and had more than once been able to help her sisters on their way. Then there came a day, just two years before that night of tribulation, when she had been sent at a moment's notice by her

institution to nurse a serious hunting accident. It was then that she and Laurence Murgatroyd had first met.

CHAPTER II.

LAURENCE MURGATROYD.

THAT accident of Laurence Murgatroyd's proved to be an eventful one for her. It was a very difficult case, long, tedious, and full of anxiety; then, when he was beginning to get about again, he told her, what every woman likes to hear, that he could not live without her, that although, as he put it, he was no "catch," he would never know another moment's peace unless she would promise to be his wife.

And of course she so promised.

At first he had, apparently, been contented enough to look forward to that some day which all lovers firmly believe in; then, as he grew stronger and began to see the effect that his nurse had upon the friends who came to see him at the farm-house where he had been carried after the accident, he also began to realize that when she was no longer nursing him she might at any moment be sent out

to attend a similar case, or at least a similar patient, and he began to be impatient of her profession, to fret and fume and rail against fate, against everything but her. And, at last, when he could stand it no longer, he insisted on her breaking the chains which bound her.

"Look here, my darling," he said to her, one day, "I know it's very grand and noble, this nursing and all that, and of course I admire you awfully for it, both for your pluck and your skill and for your uncomplaining endurance, and I shall always love you better than I happened to meet you in that way; but—but, at the same time, the day has gone by for all that sort of thing. Why, my dearest, you might be sent out to some other fellow who had been smashed up."

"Of course I might," she replied.

"Well, I don't like it; I don't like it at all. By Jove, the chap might even fall in love with you."

"It's not impossible," she said, smiling.

"Why, you might be sent to some fellow of my own regiment. By Jove, the doctor might even insist on having you. And the fellow would be safe to fall in love with you."

"Nonsense! None of my patients have fallen in love with me before."

"It would be beastly."

"Not at all; no more than it was to have to come to you."

"Yes, but you were not engaged when you came to me: it does make a difference."

"I must live," said she, quietly.

"Yes, I know; and that's the hard part of it. Look here, my dear, dear little quaint girl, with your old-world name and your semi-puritan garb, I am going to make a proposal to you. You may not like it; it may even make you rather angry with me; but I want you at least to think it well over: don't say 'no' in a hurry. I'll make a clean breast of the whole past. You know I've been a bit of an ass in my time—most fellows in the Service are, sooner or later—I got dipped, and when I expected my father to pay up my debts (because, after all, I have never had much of an allowance, though I'm the eldest son and all that) he was furious. I believe that men who have made their money in business and by their own efforts, are mostly very intolerant of every life that happens to be a bit different from

their own: at all events, I know that he is. He began life with nothing—twopence-halfpenny and a pair of clogs, I believe—and, though he is as rich as Cræsus, he is as near and as saving as—as—the grave. So, when he found that I was dipped, he told me that he would pay my debts, but that he should expect me to retrieve my folly by marrying a woman with money. Now, I don't happen to like women with money. I can't help it, I believe it is constitutional with me, but it is none the less a remarkable fact that I have never yet seen the woman with money that I should like to sell myself to. Now, all this happened, my dearest, before I had ever seen you or heard of you, before I had ever been really in love in my life. So I glibly promised that I would look for money, though without having the very smallest intention of doing it. Of course it is always easy to stave off an evil day, and if my old father likes to spend his time hunting up heiresses for me, why, it is an amusement for him, and it is quite easy for me to find some objection to them. Therefore, up to now, I have never troubled myself about his little weakness for the acquisition of money, but have gone on exactly as I have done before. One result of this

was that I soon found myself more heavily in debt than ever. I am not a bit ashamed of my debts—not a bit. I have never had a proper allowance, such as a man in an expensive cavalry regiment ought to have and requires to have, especially when he is known to be the son of an enormously rich father. I have done nothing outrageous; I've not painted the town red, nor wasted money over women, nor even thought about racing; but I'm in debt, and out of debt I cannot get without my father's intervention. So, you see, dearest, I am more or less tied to the old man, I am more or less in bondage. I mean, I cannot very well go to him and say that I have got engaged to a girl who has to work for her living. He is like all people who have been the architects of their own fortunes: he has no opinion of those who are not at the top of the ladder. So there I am; but I simply cannot stand the idea of your possibly being sent out again as you were sent to me, and I want you to make a sacrifice for me, not a very great one as circumstances are with you: I want you to consent to our being married quietly and to living out of sight until—er—well, until things adjust themselves.”

“You mean until your father dies?” said Marion.

"Well, I did not intend to put it in that cold-blooded way, dearest," Laurence Murgatroyd replied. "But, you see, my father married late in life, he is getting on in years, and of course he cannot live for ever. I would not, heaven knows, shorten the old gentleman's life by so much as a single hour, for I am exceedingly fond of him; still, when he does go he cannot take his money with him, and I feel that nobody has a better right to it than I. And I feel that nobody has a better right than I have to arrange my own marriage."

"But don't you think," said she, "that he would hear reason? Would the fact that we are in love with each other have no weight with him?"

"Not the very least in the world," replied Laurence Murgatroyd, promptly: "so you may put any such idyllic notion out of your dear little head, sweetheart, now and for ever. No, my father is a real good sort, sturdy, honest, upright, just—and as hard as flint. He boasts that his word is as good as his bond: I'm sure I wish to goodness it wasn't."

"Laurence!" she cried.

"Yes. I know what you mean, but I did not speak quite as you take it; but you know when an

old gentleman says to a boy, 'If you cough again, I'll flog you,' that is what I call the word and the bond business being a ghastly nuisance. Now, if my father once said to me, that certain effects would follow certain causes, he would keep his word, even if it killed him—and me! He has already told me that I must marry a young woman with money, and no proposal that I could make to him, no persuasions, no protestations, would move him to letting me off that part of the bargain. If I openly marry—well, my darling, you, for instance, he would at once make a new will and leave every farthing to my brother."

"I did not know that you had a brother," Marion said.

"No? Well, I don't often talk about him. I have a brother, all the same, and a regular bad hat he is. He has been a wanton and a spendthrift ever since he went into knickerbockers. In fact, there is nothing bad, short of actual criminality, that Geoffrey has not done at some time or other. My father allows him four hundred a year so long as he remains in Australia, and even that is paid to him monthly, so that he cannot slip over here betweenwhiles. He has declared his intention of

leaving him as much for his life, but no more, and I'm bound to say Geoffrey deserves no better; yet the old man's nature is so extraordinary, and so tenacious of its own way, that he would think nothing of recalling Geoffrey and making him the heir if I were to disappoint him by marrying a girl without a dower."

"And yet you propose to marry me!" she cried.

"Well, dear, if I am safely married to you I cannot possibly marry any one else."

"It would be deceiving your father."

"Only because I feel that my father is asking an unreasonable thing of me. I feel that I am justified in deceiving him so far. After all, marriage is a very personal sort of business, and by and by, when my father is gathered to his rest, poor old gentleman, it won't matter to him whether I have married a woman with money or not, whereas it will make all the difference in the world to me."

"Yes, there is something in that," she admitted.

The discussion ended as such discussions usually do. It was against the girl's open and honest nature to do anything so underhand as to marry a man secretly and against his father's wishes; but Laurence Murgatroyd had inherited a very persua-

sive tongue from his Irish ancestors. He argued that his father's objection was not a personal one, and therefore it did not count; he urged that if he could but see her he might take the greatest possible fancy to her. Besides that, he declared again and again that his father had no right to arrange his son's life, and that he was perfectly justified in planning his affairs so as to cause the least amount of annoyance to his father with the largest chance of happiness to himself.

• Finally Marion consented, and the two were married in an out-of-the-way London church, where nobody, not even the old clergyman who performed the ceremony, took much notice of them, and Nurse Marion became lost to the world which had been hers beforetime, and took up a new life as the wife of Laurence Murgatroyd.

CHAPTER III.

HOLLOW COTTAGE.

Looking back from the stand-point of that night of grief, it seemed to her that for a time she had been mad with happiness. The fact that old Mr. Mur-

Murgatroyd never escaped to worry his son on the subject of his matrimonial future only served to heighten the joys of their wonderful secret.

Marion, of course, never showed herself in the town in which her husband's regiment was quartered, even taking the precaution to do her shopping in a town which lay a dozen miles in the opposite direction. She lived in a lovely cottage half a mile from a village railway station that was just five miles from Blankhampton, where the 150th was quartered. She had one staid and trustworthy servant, whom she had taken with her from London, a comfortable person who knew her only as Mrs. West, and who confidently believed Mr. West to be on what she was pleased to call "the road."

"Simmons thinks you travel in tea, Laurie," she said to her husband one day. "It is very funny to think of your travelling in tea, isn't it?"

"It is rather by way of being a shock to me, dearest," Murgatroyd replied. "But when you come to think of it, under our circumstances such a supposition is eminently safe. If Simmons is asked any questions, she will be able to tell a lie quite guilelessly and so put the curious fairly off the

scent. I should encourage the idea; Marion. Still, it is distinctly funny, not so much my travelling in tea, for with my parentage I might be anything, but to think of you being married to such a position."

Of course their life was not all sunshine: what life ever is? There were days when Murgatroyd was on duty and could not get out to Hollow Cottage at all; there were other days when he was obliged to show himself socially, other days on which he hunted, or shot, or fished; and at such times Marion was terribly dull. She had no neighbours, no friends. The village was about a mile on the other side of the railway, and the inhabitants never thought of calling on her. Only the shy young curate found his way to Hollow Cottage, asking her if she would like to take up some parish work. Marion said "no" in such a decided tone that the poor little man never ventured to go near her again.

Yet, in spite of everything, Marion was madly, deliriously happy. She was always feverishly delighted when Laurence came, and he, on his side, always professed himself as grudging every hour spent away from her. And yet things did not altogether go smoothly.

For one thing, there was always the want of money in the modest little establishment. You see, when a man has not an income sufficient to supply his own wants, and he suddenly takes upon himself the burden of a wife, no matter how economically, even humbly, that wife lives, she cannot help but be a burden. The income that is not enough for one will not stretch itself to provide for two simply because those two are happier together than they would be apart. So, by the time the year had gone by, Laurence Murgatroyd had begun to feel very acutely indeed the pinch and inconvenience of poverty.

As he explained to Marion, it was impossible for him to alter his style of living in the regiment, and it was useless for him to expect any increase of his allowance from his father. He was more in love with Marion than ever, but love does not pay the butcher or the baker, love will not pay the dress-maker and the tailor, love costs money instead of making it; and at last there came a desperate day when Laurence Murgatroyd told his wife that something must be done.

"Laurie," she cried in desperation, "why, why

don't you make a clean breast of it to your father—tell him everything? Surely he married for love himself? You have told me that he is fond of saying that he married on a hundred and fifty pounds a year: would not that weigh with him?”

“No, honestly I don't think that it would,” Murgatroyd answered. “Probably, if it were put before him, he would argue in this way: His father provided him with nothing, he has provided me with everything, with all that I have; he would probably feel that he owed nothing to his father, and as I do owe everything to him he would consider himself perfectly justified in expecting me to be guided entirely by his wishes. He has expressed himself very strongly on the subject already, and, as you must have seen by his letters, he has no notion of giving up his original intention that I must marry money. Each time that I have been home since the unfortunate day that he paid my debts, he has trotted out heiresses of all sorts for my delectation. The first one I resolutely declined on the ground of a squint; the second had red hair; the third was dicky as to her *h's*, which he seemed to think was a very small and frivolous objection. But he writes

now that he wants me to go and look at another one, a real beauty this time and no mistake about it."

"And what excuse are you going to make this time?" Marion asked, a smile dimpling over her face in spite of the gravity of the situation.

"That is precisely what I don't know. I suppose I shall get out of it some way or other; anyway, I must."

"Yes, I am afraid, my poor Laurie, that you must," Marion rejoined, her eyes dancing. "Even for a beauty-heiress I cannot do away with myself."

"Heaven forbid that you should suggest such a thing, even in jest," he said, in horror. "However, I must try to get a few days' leave, that I may go home and find *some* fault with the lady. The most important question of all is, how on earth are you and I going to keep body and soul together? I really am desperately hard up. I had a letter from my tailor this morning saying that if I do not pay up my bill pretty soon he will place the matter in other hands. You know what that means, of course?"

"I have an idea. Is it a large bill?"

"Pretty big. Eighty/pounds or so. It might as well be eight hundred, for all the means I've got

of paying it. And then there's the rent of this little place ! It's not much, but it's due ; by Jove, it's over-due. And you tell me the excellent Simmons is expecting to be paid. I don't know how on earth we are going to do it. And not only that, but all the time I have a hateful feeling that it's all so hard on you, that I have taken you out of a life by which at least you were able to supply your wants and to hold your head up as high as any and have condemned you to a life of secrecy, an underhand, hateful way of living."

Marion turned and caught hold of both his hands. "Laurie," she said, impetuously, "tell me one thing—tell me true and plain. Are you happy when you are with me ?"

"Marion !"

"Really happy ?" she persisted.

"Yes, really happy. You are all the world to me : surely you know it. But it is no use my trying to hide from you that I should be much happier if I could take you among my fellows and introduce you to everybody as my wife, if I could dress you as you ought to be dressed, and give you the kind of surroundings which are your right."

"No, you are wrong there, Laurie," she said, gravely. "I have no rights.. I don't deserve anything better than I have got, no, nor anything half as good. You love me, and that is sufficient for me ; it is more than I ought to have. I never ought to have consented to this secret marriage ; I knew that it was wrong, and yet I had not strength enough to resist the temptation. Evil is bound to come of it, and I shall not be a bit surprised if it ends by wrecking all your prospects, and then you will hate me."

"Hate you ? Nonsense ! nonsense ! I couldn't hate you if I tried. I shall always love you all the same : only I don't see the good of throwing away my only chance of providing for you properly by not taking precautions for a time now. By the bye, dearest, I want you to be very careful in what you do and where you go, just now."

"To be careful, Laurie ? Why ?"

"Because that ass Desmond saw you yesterday."

"Desmond ? Who is he ? How did he know anything about me ?"

"He doesn't know anything about you so far, but he saw you. We were in a shop together yesterday in Blankhampton and saw you go past. I felt in a

minute that your having ventured into Blankhampton was a mistake. 'That's a pretty girl,' said he; 'I wonder who she is? Old chap, I'm going after her.' I told him not to be an ass, that you would probably be awfully offended if you knew that he was following you; but he listened to me no more than he would have listened to a little dog yapping, and bolted up the street after you."

"Oh, that was Mr. Desmond, was it?" Marion cried. "I rather thought he had the look of a soldier."

"Why, what made you notice him?"

"Because he spoke to me."

"Spoke to you!"

"Yes. Oh, he was civil—quite civil. He took off his hat and said it was a long time since he had seen me, and when I told him I did not know him he expressed great surprise, and said, 'Surely it is Mrs. Ferguson?' I said in a chilly tone that I was not Mrs. Ferguson, and he took the hint and left me."

"Mrs. Ferguson!" Laurence Murgatroyd repeated. "Then I suppose you thought he really had mistaken you?"

"Of course I did."

"Oh! Well, my dear, you are not safe any longer in this neighbourhood. How am I to go home for a week and leave you to the pestilential attentions of an ass like Desmond?"

"My dear boy," said Marion, promptly, "I assure you I can quite well take care of myself: don't worry on that score."

"I believe," he said, presently, "that if I could introduce you to my father without his knowing that you had anything to do with me, you would win him over to our side in spite of himself."

"What?" Marion cried, gaily: "would you send me into the house to nurse him? Oh, Laurie, do you think such a stale old trick would work properly?"

"To nurse him? No, I wasn't thinking of that. He is not ill; he never is. If he were, I believe you would be able to do pretty much what you chose with him, in spite of his love of money and his passion for his word and his bond. He is a very impressionable old gentleman, and tremendously susceptible to womanly charms. I should not like him to fall ill, but if he did—by Jove, that's a good idea of yours."

CHAPTER IV.

FAILURE.

IN due course of time Laurence Murgatroyd got a few days' leave and went home, writing daily to Marion, and pouring great scorn upon the pretensions to beauty possessed by his father's latest discovered heiress. "I am afraid," he wrote, "that the poor old gentleman is exceedingly wild with me. He says that he cannot imagine what I really do want. I took the opportunity of informing him, as pleasantly as I could, that I wanted to be let alone and have a little more money. However, he is still rabid on the subject of my marrying money, and not one penny will he hand over."

It is an old saying that many a true word is spoken in jest. If any one had told Marion Murgatroyd when she parted from her husband that within one week she would be sojourning under his father's roof, that she would be wearing her long discarded uniform, that she would be known as Nurse Marion once more, she would have laughed such an idea to scorn.

And yet how strange truth can be and often is! Three days later than the letter of which I have just spoken, Marion received an urgent message from her husband, a message by telegraph.

"I want you," it said, "to come here immediately. My father is suddenly very ill. I send from Burghley to save time. Wire to me at Murgatroyd Park in name of Nurse M., saying that you are on your way. Will meet you at station and explain all."

Marion had no thought of not complying with her husband's directions. She telegraphed back in the terms suggested by him, donned her gray uniform, packed up the blue linen dresses and white aprons which she had been accustomed to wear when on duty, and in due course of time arrived at the station, which was three miles and a half from Murgatroyd Park. Laurence met her there, and quickly hurried her into a comfortable brougham. As soon as they were off he rapidly explained the extraordinary coincidence which had led to his sending for her in such a strange fashion.

"He was taken ill yesterday—influenza, of course. He has never been ill in all his life before, and the doctor seems to think he is going to have

it badly. He ordered a nurse at once, and as there is not a nurse to be had apparently for love or money, and influenza is simply raging all over the country, I suggested trying to get a nurse from the institution that sent me the only nurse I ever required. Everything has fallen out beautifully: you have only to go in and win. Now you must remember, darling, that you are the same nurse who pulled me through my accident. You had better tell that to the doctor at once; but I don't think you need say anything to my father until you have ingratiated yourself a little with him. I think, on the whole, it was lucky that he only saw me when you were off duty, as it happened."

Ingratiate herself! Looking back but a few hours, it seemed to Marion that she ought to have felt the danger she was running.

Ingratiate herself! She had changed her gray uniform for a blue linen gown, and, looking as dainty as a nurse in a play, she had summoned up all her courage and gone into the room where Mr. Murgatroyd was lying. The sick man turned his head and watched her as she came to the side of his bed, uttering some pleasant commonplace, as is the habit of nurses newly come upon the scene.

His first utterance made her almost jump out of her skin.

“Mrs. Robinson,” he said, in a loud, hard tone, “take that young woman away. I’ll have no flighty little lasses worrying me.” Take her away: I don’t like the look of her.”

Nurses who are accustomed to going about the world are well used to finding patients who object strongly to their presence; but this is a matter which does not often cause dismay to a really clever nurse, and frequently patients who have begun with every symptom of detestation end by being helplessly dependent upon the very nurses whom once they openly scorned.

In the case of John Murgatroyd, however, such a happy state of affairs did not supervene on the introduction of Nurse Marion into his sick-chamber. From the first moment he showed the most intense dislike of her. There was no earthly reason why he should have done so, but it was nevertheless a fact. He detested her. He informed the doctor in attendance upon him that it was an insult to expect him to submit to the ministrations of a young thing who might be his

grand-daughter, and in vain did the doctor, who was much troubled at the time by a scarcity of nurses, expostulate with him, and declare that nurses, just then, were not to be had for love or money.

"I would rather be without a nurse at all," John Murgatroyd growled, indignantly. "I've got plenty of servants."

"But, with the exception of Mrs. Robinson, your servants are all young, Mr. Murgatroyd," the doctor cried. "She is old enough, the Lord knows, but one night is enough to knock her up, and she has neither the experience nor the strength to be of any good. You are very ill, my dear sir, much too ill to be dependent on unskilled and untrained attention. To leave you to your own woman-servants is out of the question. I cannot continue in charge of your case if you are going to handicap me by giving me a nurse who does not know a lotion from a tonic."

"I'll never believe," said John Murgatroyd, obstinately, "that yon bit lassie knows aught of such a case as mine. Where is she to learn? *Experientia docet*, doctor—truer words were never written—but where is von bit lassie to have got

"My dear Mr. Murgatroyd," returned the doctor, who was fast losing patience, "your bit lassie has had three years in a good London hospital. She has been hard at work for several years since then, and she has a sheaf of testimonials such as ought to satisfy even you. And, mind you, there is not a nurse to be had just now, neither far nor near, and half, nay, nine-tenths, of the influenza cases that end fatally do so for want of good nursing. While this plague of influenza is raging all over the country, and the unfortunate nurses get broken down one by one from overwork, it will be more difficult to obtain them. On my word, you ought to think yourself very lucky to get a competent, skilled nurse without a single day's delay. Now be a sensible man, Mr. Murgatroyd—you know you are a sensible man—and don't let a mere matter of prejudice spoil your chance of getting over this."

"Well, you may say what you like, doctor, and it may be as you say," said John Murgatroyd, still speaking with extreme indignation, "and there may not be a nurse to be had for love or money, but I don't like it, I tell you; I don't like it at all. I

"and I don't like having her about
as like that; it's ridiculous!"

"Murgatroyd, I really thought you
e, I did indeed. Isn't it better to
saying things like that about you than
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asked Laurie.

p of a girl tricked out in her cap.
ort of nun. I don't like her, and
doesn't like me."

er nonsense," exclaimed Laurie.

an declared, "it is not nonsense.

She looks at me as if she expected things at her; and I quite expect, I shall end by doing it."

"Well, you see, Father, you were v
her when she first came. You called
were to take her away, just as if she
nightmare. And, of course, she's young
people don't like that kind of treat
don't give the poor girl a chance. S
don't like her; and indeed you make
deuced clear on that point that there's
her making any mistake about it. A
when she is trying to do her best for you
think it's very rough on her?"

"No, I don't," said Mr. Murgatroyd
in his best days had never been able to
question except from his own standpoint
certainly in no wise softened by his illness
a nice, comfortable, middle-aged nurse,
like so much of that ridiculous cap
business."

"My dear old dad," said Laurie, "as I
get thoroughly well looked after, what
matter whether your nurse wears a cap

I am sure Nurse Marion is very nice and very kind, and always anxious to do everything for her patient that is possible. Why, when she nursed me——”

“What?” cried the old man.

“When she nursed me. What! didn’t you know? Why, of course; she was the nurse who pulled me through that big smash I had at Danford. I always found her most kind and untiring, most attentive in every way; and when that sciatica came on with the influenza, and poor old Mrs. Robinson had no more notion than a pussy-cat how to cope with it, I naturally got the same nurse that I had found so good. I—I thought it such luck that she was able to come; though, of course, if I had known that you would take against her in this foolish way, I’d have left it all alone. But how was I to know?” he went on, vexedly.

“Oh, I dare say I am prejudiced,” John Murgatroyd admitted—and it was no small admission for a man who prided himself on never changing his mind—“but I like an older woman. I don’t like flighty young girls. I’m no match for ’em.”

“How do you mean, no match?” asked his son.

“Oh, you know what I mean. I don’t feel safe

THE PRICE OF A WIFE.

with a bit of a lass like that. Why, she might take it into her head to marry me."

At this suggestion, thus naïvely put, Laurence Murgatroyd sat back in his chair and laughed aloud. "My dear old dad," he cried, at last, "you really do beat everything in the way of a joke that ever I came across. The idea of such a notion ever entering your head at your time of you are! Well, well! the vanity of there's no end to it. On my word, y thing. Look here, now: if Nurse any of the marrying dodge over you, for me, and I'll soon put matters ri you. But do, my dear dad, make up put up with her for a bit. It neve horses when you're crossing the stream

"I don't like putting up with he old man persisted. "She's got no w nervous and unhandy; her fingers a She always speaks to me as if she going to throw the first thing that o her head. She's a deal too much of my taste, and she gives me the idea real nurse; somehow. I wish you'd se

CHAPTER V.

HARD TO BEAR.

As the days crept on, the old man's antipathy to Marion became more and more pronounced, until finally he would not, if any one else were near, take anything from her hand or allow her to wait upon him in any way. And at last Marion implored her husband to let her leave Murgatroyd Park.

"Laurie," she said, piteously, "I have done my very best; indeed I have. He won't have me at any price: he won't take anything from me: he is full of hatred and suspicion of me. I believe he thinks I want to poison him. I cannot stand it any longer: let me go away."

"You can't go away and leave him without a nurse," Laurie replied, savagely. "The poor old man is desperately ill; you know that as well or better than I do."

"He is better than he was, Laurie," she urged; "and every hour that I stay here only retards instead of helping his recovery."

"Why on earth can't you manage to ingratiate

yourself a little with him?" he went on, not heeding her words; "you have a chance—or had; never had any woman a better. And now, when everything is hanging on it, you must needs give in. It's the first time I have ever asked you to do anything for me—and you have failed."

Marion turned and looked at him. It was the first time that he had ever spoken to her otherwise than in gentleness and love; and as she stood there eyecing him, an awful and a horrible thought came into her mind that after all he was the son of his father. "Laurie," she said, "I have done my best."

"And a very poor best, too," he burst out. "Well, I suppose I shall have to send up to town and try to get somebody else: you leave me no choice. But don't shut your eyes to one main fact: you will never have such a chance again. If you cannot contrive to get hold of the old man now, you will never do it, and Geoffrey will have everything. It is hard lines, for, except in this matter, I've stuck to him through thick and thin. And it's harder, even, when I have risked so much and given up so much for you, that you cannot do a little thing like this for me. No, by Jove, not for me, but for us both."

"Laurie," she cried, desperately, "you don't mean to imply that I have not done my best, tried my hardest, to win your father over? Why, when I came here I was ready to do anything for him; you know that. But he is dead against me, dead against me! The truth is, he sees through me—not that I'm your——"

"Hush-sh-sh!" he exclaimed, looking round apprehensively.

"But he knows I'm no ordinary nurse," she went on; "he feels it. Instinct is very strong with him, and I suppose my anxiety has made my face tell-tale. Anyway, it is doing us more harm than good for me to stay here; indeed it is."

"Oh, I dare say it is not pleasant for you," he said, vexedly.

"You have no right to speak to me like that," she said, with a certain dignity which told him, vexed as he was, that she was deeply wounded; "you have no right to speak to me like that, nor yet to throw at me that you have run risks and given up some things for my sake. I too have made sacrifices for you. I gave up my honest living. I never asked you to give up anything for

me: no, the asking was all on your side; but you do not hesitate to throw it at me all the same."

"Oh, I dare say I have been a fool. I'm not the first fellow who has made a fool of himself," Laurence Murgatroyd cried, savagely. "However, we have tried our little scheme and it has failed. So there is nothing more to be done. The best thing you can do is to get away; but you cannot in decency go until we have found a substitute for you: no nurse would. But don't expect me to say that I'm glad you're going, or that I think you are doing the right thing, or that you have managed this business well, because I don't. You had a good chance, and you have lost it."

They were together in the library, a superb apartment, in which she had sought him after an unusually difficult hour with the old man, in order to tell him of her determination to go. She was standing by the great table of carved oak, her face white with distress, her eyes dark with pain, her whole person and attitude indicative of hesitancy and trouble. She stood still by the table; he, on the contrary, was walking restlessly about the room, his hands thrust deep down into his pockets, his

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face in the blackest frown that Marion had ever seen it wear.

"You are not angry with me, Laurie?" she said, at last, in imploring tones.

"Angry!" he repeated, roughly. "No, I'm not angry, but I'm disappointed, and vexed, and sore."

"Not with me, Laurie?"

"Yes, with you. It is no use lying to you or pretending otherwise, which would be a lie. I am disappointed. I made sure you would pull off this business properly. But there, just like a woman, you must let everything slide because an old man, who is sick and full of crotchets, shows you the rough side of his tongue. One hears a good deal about you nurses being angels of patience, and hours of ease, and all that rot, but, by Jove, when one wants you to do something a bit out of the ordinary, one soon finds out how mortal you are after all."

"I have never pretended to be anything but mortal," said Marion, drawing back a little and holding herself very stiffly. "So, Laurence, as I don't want to have this kind of argument again, I will tender my formal notice as your father's nurse."

Will you be good enough to fill up my place as soon as possible?"

He turned and looked at her, and it must be admitted that for once Laurence Murgatroyd, though in general a singularly good-tempered person, was in a towering passion.

"And is that all?" he asked.

"All? Yes, that is all. Unfortunately, I cannot," said Marion, with a miserable frozen kind of dignity, "tender my notice to *you*."

CHAPTER VI.

PUTTING ON THE TIME.

MARION had certainly never since her marriage looked so like the Nurse Marion of old as when, with her head held well up in the air, she turned and walked out of the great library at Murgatroyd Park. She closed the door very quietly behind her, and felt, poor girl, that she was closing the door on all her brightest hopes of existence.

If she could have gone straight away then and there, it would not have seemed so hard; but that course was impossible. Old Mr. Murgatroyd was

still very ill, and, whether he liked or disliked her, she was compelled to minister to him in quite the usual way, which was, as a matter of course, just as she would have done if she had found herself fully appreciated by him.

She went straight up to the sick-room, busied herself with various small occupations, and then went towards the bed, carrying with her some medicine in a glass. "It is time for your medicine, Mr. Murgatroyd," she said, in as cheerful a tone as she could assume.

"Where is Mrs. Robinson?" was his ungracious retort.

"Mrs. Robinson is in bed with the influenza, and is very ill," said Marion, promptly.

"Since when?"

"Since last night. I'll fetch her, if you like, but it will be her death if she comes," said Marion, in a chilly tone.

"Why wasn't I told?" ignoring her remark.

"By way of sparing your feelings, I believe," said Marion, standing still and eyeing him with distant and disdainful gaze. "And if the poor old lady does die, you will have the satisfaction of knowing, sir, that you had a good hand in killing her."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Just what I say. Your son brought me here at great inconvenience to myself, and you have pretty well worried your old housekeeper's life out by your ridiculous hatred of me. «You must forgive me for speaking plainly, Mr. Murgatroyd, but your hatred of me is ridiculous. Do you think it was any pleasure to me to come hundreds of miles to nurse a cross old man, who snarls at one every other moment as if one was a dog, or he was? You are very ill, but you've got a first-class nurse, to whom a bit of a case like this is mere child's play. Why can't you be content, and spend your energy in trying to get well, instead of setting your wits to work and trying to make me miserable? If I were a man in your position, I shouldn't think nurse-baiting a good enough amusement."

The old man turned his head uneasily on his pillows and fixed his hard, keen gaze on Marion's scornful face. "You've a sharp tongue of your own, young woman," he remarked, at last.

"I need it with you, Mr. Murgatroyd," was her quick retort. "And, by the bye, you may be glad to hear that I went down just now to see Mr.

Laurence" (Laurence Murgatroyd was always called so in his father's house), "and I told him that he must look out for another nurse with as little delay as possible. So you will soon be rid of me; only, while I am here, don't you think you may as well let me make myself as useful as I can?"

"You went and saw Laurence? You gave him notice?" the old man exclaimed.

"I did."

"And why to Laurence? Why not to me? Is my son master of this house?" John Murgatroyd demanded.

"I don't know, I'm sure. I do know that Mr. Laurence engaged me to nurse you, and I did not suppose that you would wish to be writing letters just now. I don't quite see how you are to do it. Mr. Laurence said nothing about being master. I suppose he is doing his best for you. He seems anxious enough, anyway."

"Anxious? Ay, he's a good lad, my Laurence, a good lad," was the old man's unexpected remark.

"Don't you think you had better take your medicine?" said Marion.

"Here, give it to me." And John Murgatroyd

drained the glass without further ado, then lay back again among his pillows and eyed Marion curiously.

"What did he say?" he asked, at last.

"Who? Your son?"

"Who else were we speaking of? What did he say when you told him you were going?"

"He was vexed, of course; equally of course, he blamed me for not having made myself more agreeable to you," Marion replied, without hesitation.

"Oh, he did?"

"Need you ask? Is not the woman always wrong?" said Marion, bitterly.

"It doesn't matter what Laurence said," said the old man, still more uneasily.

"Not the very least in the world," responded Marion, with a cheerfulness which was a little overdone.

"Laurence has nothing to do with it: it's no fault of his that you and I don't get on. I—I—hope—at least, I would rather——"

"It is not worth talking of," said Marion. "I am going away as soon as I can, be replaced. But for the present Mrs. Robinson, poor old soul, is very ill, and cannot look after you. Don't you

think you had better put up with me till you get somebody else better?"

"Perhaps." It was ungraciously said, but still it was a consent, and a distinct one.

"I know your leg is very painful to-night; I can see it in every line of your face. Come, let me give it a good rub with the lotion?"

"It does hurt pretty badly," he admitted.

"Sciatica is agony, or most people think so," said Marion. "Anyway, it is as near to agony as any one need want to go. And when it comes on with influenza it is unbearable."

"She doesn't rub that way," he grumbled.

"Perhaps not. Don't you think you had better try my way?" said Marion, with a smile. It was a smile covering a breaking heart, but the old man, brimful of his aches and pains and prejudices, saw nothing of that. He was only filled with satisfaction to think that the "young thing" was going, and he was therefore more inclined to be tolerant towards her than he would have been if he had not known of the interview with Laurence, and that Mrs. Robinson, poor old soul, was fast in the grip of the same illness as himself.

So Marion, given a fair field, rubbed the poor tortured leg into something like comfort, and John Murgatroyd for once submitted to her ministrations without the usual growls and snarls of disfavour.

He was just settled again when Laurence came into the room. "Well, dad, how are you feeling now?"

"A-bit better," answered the old man. "You never told me that Mrs. Robinson was ill."

"I thought it would worry you, and that perhaps you would never miss her," Laurence answered.

"You must take me for a regular fool, then," John Murgatroyd growled.

"Oh, no, I don't; but sick people don't notice every one that comes and goes."

"Yon lass tells me she's going."

"Yes, I believe she is."

"You believe? Don't you know? Haven't you written for another?"

"Not yet. You forget, dad, that the post goes out at five o'clock. I'll write in the morning."

"And be sure you say I want a nice, comfortable, middle-aged person," said John Murgatroyd. "I don't like these bits of young things about me. Not but what she's done better to-night."

"You must give her another chance," said Laurence, in his easiest tones.

"Nothing of the sort," sharply. "She doesn't like me any better than I like her. It's best for us to part."

"Much the best," put in Marion, coldly.

"Oh, as you like, of course. I'll write the first thing in the morning."

As a matter of fact, Laurence Murgatroyd, urged by some expression in Marion's face, did more the following day than write in quest of another nurse. He despatched a special messenger to the nearest town and sent a telegram to the only nursing institution which he knew of, asking whether there was a nurse to be had or not. Within a couple of hours the answer came back, "Regret, not a single nurse in. Patients waiting ten deep."

This reply he carried to the old man. "You see, dad," he said, "that there really is a great difficulty in getting nurses; they're simply not to be had."

"H'm! I see."

"I can't think why you need have taken such a dislike to Nurse Marion," Laurence went on, vexedly. "Such luck as it was to get her, too!

Patients waiting ten deep, you see. Not, I dare say, that she would consent to stay now.' I wouldn't, if I were she, after the way you've treated her."

"Pooh!"

"Ah, that's what you rich people always think—that you can buy everything you want with money. You can't always do it, and money is not quite the power you think it."

"She'd stay fast enough. I'd be sorry to ask her if I didn't want her."

"Perhaps so. She's our only hope at present."

"I dare say," the old man admitted.

Laurence Murgatroyd looked at his father keenly. "Dad," he said, "you don't feel just as you did about her. You're getting over your prejudices."

"Oh, the wench has got a spirit, and I like her the better for it," John Murgatroyd flashed out.

"A spirit? How do you know?"

"Because she dropped on to me last night for not liking her. Ay, she let me have it properly, too. I didn't think she had it in her."

"Oh, there's plenty in her."

"How do you know?" quickly marking his son's tone.

"How do I know?" with a laugh. "Why, because she pulled me through a big smash, of course. By Jove, you get to know your nurse's moods then, I can tell you. She managed me properly, but I had to obey orders. She stood no fooling. If she had, I shouldn't be here this minute."

At the very first chance Laurence Murgatroyd sought out his wife. It was not easy, for every one in that large household was well on the alert, and anything like familiar intercourse between the nurse and the young master would have been noticed at once. In fact, so difficult was it, now that Marion was in her most strictly professional guise, that Laurence was reduced to the necessity of sending a formal message asking her to come to him in the library for ten minutes.

He had to wait nearly an hour, but at last she came. "You sent for me," she said, quietly. "I am sorry to keep you waiting, but I could not come. Your father is not nearly so well to-day; I could not leave him."

"Yes. I sent for you. I wanted to say something. Marion, you are getting on better."

"Perhaps."

"No, it is not perhaps; it is a fact. You have the game in your own hands."

"I don't think so."

"But if he asks you to stay, you will?"

"I really cannot."

"Marion!" reproachfully, "don't say that. Dearest, you are not angry with me for what I said yesterday?"

"You hurt me yesterday, Laurence."

"Did I? I never meant to do so. Darling, I know it's awfully hard lines on you to be here like this in the house where you ought to be the mistress; but, for my sake, do try to bear it to the end. I feel that you will conquer the old man in time. He is old and full of whims and caprices, more than ever now that he is ill. But he's a dear old chap down at the bottom, he is really; and if you will only try to win him over, I know all will be right. Your woman's wit will get round him in time. You walked into him, he tells me, and he admires you for it."

"I am highly honoured."

"He——Marion, you are crying."

"Nothing of the kind," she said, sharply.

"Then you ought to be. Marion, my darling, if I was a brute to you yesterday—and I believe I was—try to forgive me. Don't let you and me fall out, even if everything else goes against us. Come, don't look at me like that. You'll find out by and by that the best of us are mistaken fools at times. But—but—won't you give me a kiss, Marion?"

She was not very easy to win over. It was the first time that so much as a shadow had ever come between them, and she had been terribly wounded by his sharp words of the previous day. She had felt, too, very bitterly the humiliation of her defeat, her failure.

Still, she was young, and very much in love with her husband, and he was persuasive and full of penitence. So the little breach was bridged over, and Marion promised that if the old man showed any signs of wishing her to remain, she would stay and do her best to win him over to eventual forgiveness.

"But, mind you, it is only a forlorn hope, Laurie," she said, resting her head against his as they sat together. "He doesn't really like me, and, if you get another nurse, he will gladly see the last of me."

"I don't think so; and we cannot get another nurse," Laurence replied. "And by the bye, dearest, I have arranged with Mrs. Mackay, the under-keeper's mother, to come up to the house and do what she can to relieve you. She won't be much good as a nurse, but she might sit up to-night while you get something like a night's rest."

"Is she a nice, comfortable, middle-aged person?" Marion asked, with a smile.

"I should say most uncomfortable, for she is just like a tub," Laurence replied. "But she is a capable, sensible woman, who will be of some help. We should have had her in before but that she was away from home, nursing a daughter."

"Then my chance is over," said Marion.

"On the contrary, the difference will be so marked that it is probably only just begun."

CHAPTER VII.

A COMFORTABLE, MIDDLE-AGED PERSON.

"DAD," said Laurence Murgatroyd to his father when he first went into the old man's room after his interview with Marion, "I have seen Mrs.

Mackay. She is coming up presently to lend a hand with you."

"Eh?"

"Yes. I hope she'll be comfortable and middle-aged enough to satisfy you. I'm sure she's fat enough to please any one."

"Mrs. Mackay—— H'm! And pray why can't the lass do? She's stayed on and stayed on——"

"Nurse Marion is only human, you know, dad. She really does want a night's rest now and again. I regularly jumped at the chance of getting Mrs. Mackay as soon as she came home. I thought you'd be immensely pleased."

"I'll be immensely pleased when I've got quit of all these womenfolk for good and all," growled John Murgatroyd. "However, the lass can go to bed, and thankful shall I be to have Mrs. Mackay in her stead."

The under-keeper's mother arrived presently, a huge tub of a woman, not so tall in stature as huge in girth, with a bust like a feather bed. She had a round, red, shining face, radiant as the sun at noontide, and a pleasant enough voice to those who understood a real Scottish accent.

"I wonder how long he will put up with that."

murmured Marion to Laurence, as the "nice, comfortable, middle-aged woman" crossed the room with a footfall which made the floor actually shake under her tread. "Not very long, I should say."

But the night passed, by, and, though John Murgatroyd suffered tortures, nobody but himself was the wiser. In truth, he would rather have died than have let "the lass" know how much he missed her and how much he had to endure by reason of the change. He was very ill, and the sciatica, which remained persistently in one limb, gave him neither peace nor rest by day or night. Marion had given Mrs. Mackay the bottle of lotion and told her how to use it; but her unskilled efforts were so terrible to the old man that he suffered the pain in silence rather than endure the double torture of her heavy hand upon the quivering limb.

He was a strange old man. He had taken a violent and wholly unreasonable dislike to Marion, a dislike which almost amounted to a detestation, and he had never hesitated to give full and open expression to it, in utter disregard of her feelings and his welfare alike. Towards Mrs. Mackay, during the few days which followed her intro-

duction into the establishment, his feelings were altogether different. He not only disliked her, he feared her. Not in a mental sense, for John Murgatroyd was afraid of nothing and nobody, but with an actual physical, bodily fear. He grew to dread the quiver which her heavy footfall sent through his tortured limb; the touch of her hand upon the bedclothes; the very accents of her sing-song voice grated upon his ears, and her peaceful snores, when she sat down near the bed and, as she put it, "dropped off for a minute or two," were only less horrible to him than the shortness of breath which the smallest exertion accentuated in her. Yet all this he bore in silence rather than own up frankly that a "nice, comfortable, middle-aged person" could be inferior to a "bit of a lass." The result was that, instead of improving by reason of the change, John Murgatroyd's health steadily grew worse, until he became so nervous and exhausted that the doctor was almost at his wits' end. Still, he never breathed a single word of the true state of affairs, and Mrs. Mackay continued in her office, quite unconscious but that she was the greatest help and comfort to the master.

Marion, however, was not so blind as the others about the sick man. She was quick to recognize by straws which way the stream flowed. She realized on the second morning that he had not allowed Mrs. Mackay to rub his leg.

"How many times did you rub Mr. Murgatroyd's leg?" she asked, carelessly, holding the bottle up to the light.

"I spiered o' the master ilka time if he wadna hae it dune," Mrs. Mackay made haste to reply. "But he wadna."

"It doesn't hurt me—much," growled a voice from the bed.

"Well, that's a blessing, anyway," was Marion's cheerful remark. "All the same, Mr. Murgatroyd, I think we won't quite give up attending to it. You had better let me give it a good rubbing now."

He said not a word against the suggestion, and some instinct told the girl that it had not been lack of pain which had prevented him from accepting Mrs. Mackay's attentions.

She remained up herself that night, letting her helper stay with the sick man for a few hours in the evening. And, as she suspected, and is almost

always the case, the pain in the leg was much worse than it had been during the day.

"I shall not leave your father at night again," she said to Laurence: "that good, fat, 'nice, comfortable, middle-aged person' is throwing him back by her elephantine attentions. She must come for a few hours in the evening; he is always at his best then. I can get quite enough rest to put me through the night comfortably."

"As you judge best, of course," said Laurence.

"I am sure that will be best. You know, Laurie, I am no nearer to your goal yet—no nearer than I was. He likes me no better than he did."

"Oh, I think you are wrong there, dearest."

"No," shaking her head. "Perhaps he does not openly hate me as he did, but that is all. Still, I do think he realizes that I know something about nursing."

"Of course he does. He has never mentioned 'nice, comfortable, middle-aged persons' since Mrs. Mackay arrived on the scene. By the way, I shall have to go back to the regiment the day after to-morrow."

"Will you really?"

"Yes; further leave is impossible just now. I may get a few days later on if the poor old dad should be worse. I shall not be surprised if you completely subjugate him as soon as I am gone; only, no larks, mind—no setting your cap at your patient."

"I shall do my best. But, oh, Laurie, joking apart, it will be dreadful when you are gone. He will miss you horribly, and he will be so difficult to do for."

"I doubt it. He will be more dependent on you, and therefore more amenable. At all events, I cannot get any extension of leave—not as things are with him at present. You may be sure that I shall do my best to get back again as soon as possible."

"Have you told your father?"

"Not yet. But I will presently," was Laurie's reply.

It was, on the whole, as well that Laurence Murgatroyd happened to communicate the news of his impending departure to the old man when the two were alone.

"What!" he exclaimed, "you're going away?—you're going to leave me to—that lass and the

old woman? Then you'll soon have to get leave to come to my burying."

Laurence Murgatroyd laughed. "Surely not so bad as that, sir?" he said, jokingly. "You are getting used to Nurse Marion, and—and Mrs. Mackay is a nice, comfortable, middle-aged person. What could you have better?"

"I'm—Mrs. Mackay! But there, no doubt she does her best; but a poor best it is. How's Mrs. Robinson—poor old soul?"

"Pretty bad, from what I can make out. She does not seem to shake off the illness as she ought to do."

"Who's nursing her?" the old man asked, in an unwilling tone.

He was like many other sick people, he hated being laid by the heels, it was in fact a wholly distasteful situation to him, but all the same he bitterly resented that any member of his *entourage* should have the audacity to fall sick when he had special need of his or her services. But, blunt and outspoken as he was, he would never put the idea into plain words. If he had spoken his mind at that moment, he would probably have remarked

that it was in the aggrayating nature of woman-kind that Mrs. Robinson should fall sick at the moment when there was the utmost need that she should remain well.

"Who is nursing her?" he asked.

"Nursing her?" repeated Laurence, lifting his eyebrows. "I don't think, sir, anybody gets nursed except yourself. Cook does a little, and the maids do a little, and Nurse Marion looks in whenever she can get away from your side. If I could get a couple more nurses down I would, but it's not to be done; nurses are at a premium just now, and poor old Mrs. Robinson has to suffer in consequence."

"H'm. Why doesn't Mrs. Mackay help?"

"Mrs. Mackay? Ah, you would think that such a nice, comfortable, middle-aged person would fill that crevice very nicely, wouldn't you? But Mrs. Robinson, unfortunately, has the same objection to her as yourself."

"Objection? I never said I had any objection."

"No, not in plain words, sir, but you must think me a very blind bat if you suppose I can't see that that nice motherly Mrs. Mackay sets your teeth on edge every time she comes near you."

"She's not much of a nurse," growled the old man, unwillingly.

"No, I shouldn't think she was. Good, estimable woman, good wife, excellent mother, and all that, I have no doubt, but as a nurse—as a nurse I pin my faith to Nurse Marion; she knows her business. Indeed, Nannie told me yesterday that if it hadn't been for Nurse Marion she'd have been in her grave days ago."

"Oh, you have seen her?"

"Oh, yes, I've seen her every day, of course."

For a moment or two there was silence between them, then the old man spoke again. "I wish, Laurie," he said, "that you hadn't to go away."

"So do I. But you know, governor, you would make a gentleman of me; you would have me go into the Service, and the Service don't believe in sick relations."

"But nobody can say that I'm not sick—sick unto death."

"Yes, I know; but nothing would make our colonel believe it."

"You could send a doctor's certificate."

"I'm afraid, my dear old dad, that commanding

officers, in these decadent days, are proof against even doctors' certificates. Upon *my* soul, I don't believe that even a death certificate itself would fetch him."

"I don't know what you mean by decadent," said the old gentleman, with a growl. "I wish you wouldn't use your long dictionary words to me; downright bad form, I call it. Look here, you'd better send a wire to your colonel and say I am very ill and I cannot spare you."

"My dear dad," said Laurence Murgatroyd, easily, yet in a tone which carried conviction with it, "I'm not so anxious to get back to the regiment but that I've tried every dodge for remaining here. I've written twice to the colonel, and twice he's granted me a small extension of leave. I've quoted the doctor's opinion to him and asked for longer leave, and all the reply I got was that my leave was at an end on such a day. I'm afraid I'm like all the rest of them: I've invented relatives too often for him to believe even in my own father."

"I call it shameful of you," said the old gentleman, but there was a twinkle in his eye which belied his words. "Have you done anything else?"

"Yes," said his son, in a tone that was a little more short. "I sent him a wire this morning, and the reply I got was from the adjutant, saying, 'Further leave impossible.' So you see, dad, I must go back. I hate leaving you now. Don't," seeing that his father was about to speak—"don't make believe anything about my having been dull or anything of that kind; I have been nothing of the sort. I have been anxious about you—deadly anxious; for you know," with a little break in his voice, "you know what I think about you; and if it wasn't that I am leaving you in skilled hands, by Jove, I'd chuck the Service straight away; yes, that I would! But it seems a pity, when I'm so near my troop, and you're so proud of my unearned glory. But if you are a shade worse, Dad, don't hesitate to wire for me. Unless the circumstances were very exceptional, even a commanding officer, worn out with his subalterns' sick relatives, would scarcely be so hard-hearted as to refuse a wire which was distinctly genuine; besides, if necessary, you could get the doctor to do it."

"I'll bear it in mind, I'll bear it in mind, Laurie," said the old man.

CHAPTER VIII.

LAURENCE MURGATROYD'S LAST WORD.

JOHN MURGATROYD said nothing more to his son when he acquiesced in his leaving home on the following day; indeed, the conversation had ended in the old man's dropping asleep, and Laurence Murgatroyd slipped out of the room into the dressing-room adjoining, where he found Marion, who had just come from her own room after her day's sleep.

"Well, have you told him?" she asked, eagerly. "I didn't come in, because I heard you talking; I heard that you were there. What did he say?"

"Oh, yes, I told him. He's not very pleased at my going; he seems to think that you are bound to set your cap at him if you are left here alone. But mark my words, Marion, the worst is over. He didn't make half such a fuss about being left as he would have done if he were still hating you as much as he did in the beginning."

She stood with her foot upon the fender, looking thoughtfully into the fire. "He doesn't hate me as

he did," she said: "he only dislikes me. He has got over the worst of it, as you say; but I don't think he will end by feeling anything better for me than mere tolerance."

"I don't want him to fall in love with you," said Laurence Murgatroyd, smiling.

The old man was distinctly better that day, stronger, less quarrelsome, more reasonable, and his son began, with that easiness which is characteristic of human beings, particularly of the stronger sex, to fancy that what he wished was an accomplished fact, to flatter himself that his father had seen the folly of trying to arrange a marriage for him, and that, even supposing he was not willing to accept Nurse Marion as his daughter-in-law, he would at least abandon further efforts to lead his son into the bonds of holy matrimony. He had, however, reckoned without his host. The character which John Murgatroyd had earned among his fellows of being one of the most steadfast men that had ever drawn the breath of heaven was not without some traces of obstinacy. There is but a very fine line drawn between the two characteristics, and in the nature of John Murgatroyd it would have puzzled

stronger head than any at that time to be found in Murgatroyd Park to distinguish clearly where steadfastness went out and obstinacy came in.

So when Laurie, secure in the feeling that all things were working together for good, went to take leave of his father, he was considerably startled when the old man put a leading question to him.

"Oh, you've come to say good-bye, have you?" was his almost ungrateful remark. "So you've made up your mind not to stay with the old man any longer?"

"Now, Dad, you know it's not that," said Laurence, reproachfully.

"Ah, you say not, you say not. Send yon lass out of the room: I want to speak to you privately."

His son looked towards Nurse Marion, and that young lady disappeared with so much promptitude that even the old gentleman could not find occasion for grumbling.

"Well, Dad, what is it?" he asked.

"It is just this, Laurie. You never gave me an answer about that girl."

"What girl?"

"Why, Potter's daughter."

"Oh, Potter's daughter — Miss Potter," said Laurie, comprehensively. "What about her, Dad?"

"What about her?" The old man peered up at him from among his many pillows, with a look which seemed to say, "Don't you really know, or are you trying to fool me?" "What about her? Well, are you going to marry her, or aren't you?"

"I am certainly not going to marry Miss Potter," said Laurence, in a very blank voice. "Did she tell you we were engaged? I hope not."

"No, sir, she did not tell me you were engaged; she did not mention you one way or the other; but she has got fifty thousand pounds in her own right, and she is a fine upstanding wench, and I think she would suit you very well."

"Oh, do you?" said Laurence, delicately scratching his head with the tip of his third finger. "You think she'd suit me, do you, Dad? Do you think she'd have me?"

"Do I think she'd have you? She'd jump at you; I know that perfectly well."

"Oh, do you! Well, I shouldn't like to be refused."

"You'll not be refused; I have reason to know that."

"Oh, have you? Evidently she's been confiding in you, Dad."

"I didn't say so," growled the old man.

"Oh, well, no, perhaps you didn't actually say so—no; but, let me see, Miss Potter—Miss Potter—— by the 'bye, how should you like to marry Potter's girl yourself, Dad?"

"I don't want to marry anybody. How could an old hulk like me marry any one?"

"Because I was going to suggest that you should marry her yourself."

"I don't want to marry any one," said the old man.

"Neither do I," said his son, in a bland and confidential tone. "Just now I don't feel, Dad, as if I could marry any one, least of all Miss Potter. I know that she has fifty thousand pounds, and, as you say, she's a fine, upstanding wench, but marry her——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" John Murgatroyd growled.

"Yes? Well, we had better think it over, eh? I haven't been troubling myself about marrying and all that sort of thing lately. Don't you think

we might put it off until you get more like yourself again?"

"No," said John Murgatroyd, "I don't. There's no time like the present."

"Well, but I'm going back to the regiment; I have no time to see Miss Potter, and ingratiate myself with her. I couldn't ask her cold-bloodedly, without getting to like her a little at first."

The old man tried to raise himself into an upright position, but the sudden movement caused him such a thrill of agony through his tortured limb that he fell back on his pillows with a groan.

"Laurence," he said, "I am very ill, but I'm no fool. You are trying to make me one this minute."

"No, Dad," said Lawrence; "the boot is on the other leg. It is you who are trying to fool me, when you gravely suggest, almost with vigour, that I shall sell myself to Miss Potter for fifty thousand pounds and the rest. I would do a good deal to oblige you, Dad, short of marrying somebody I don't like; that I will never do. You can't seriously mean that I shall sell myself to Miss Potter? You don't seriously mean that you would like Miss Potter to be the mistress of Murgatroyd? What is

fifty thousand pounds to you? You are worth millions."

"How do you know that?"

"How do I know it? I don't know it; I only guess it; but I'm certain that fifty thousand pounds to you is a mere flea-bite. Why should you be so mercenary as to set a few pounds against your son's happiness? I grant you, Dad, I've been a fool in the past, I've gone the pace like all other fellows, and perhaps a little harder. There's no disgrace in it, only folly; but if I sold myself to a woman I didn't care for, a woman I wouldn't marry if she had nothing, I should be something more than a fool; I should be a knave then. Come now, Dad, we've been through a dark time together, you and I; don't ask me to do this horrible thing. It's bad enough to go away and leave you ill like this, when I would much rather stay; but to feel that I'm going away from you lying here planning out what would be a great satisfaction and a penance to me for all the rest of my life is horrible, Dad—horrible. Don't do it, Dad, I wouldn't if you knew what it costs me to see you like this. I can't use you anything."

1. The old man looked at his son. "I believe,"

he said at last, "that you've got other views for yourself, other fish to fry. There's some little slip of a lass without a penny that has put all these superfine thoughts into your head; they never came there of their own initiative."

"Nay, Dad, give me credit for a little that is honourable and upright."

"Laurence Murgatroyd," said the old man, "did ever you know me go back from my word? Did ever you know me break my bond, go against my pledge?"

"Never," said Laurence.

"Well, then, I have sworn that you shall marry a wife with money, and I will keep my word, whatever it costs me. Money you've wasted, money you shall bring into the Murgatroyd estate, or the Murgatroyd estate you shall never handle. Once for all, will you do it, or won't you?"

"Once for all," said Laurence Murgatroyd, "I will not marry any woman that I don't love. I am no fool, though I may have sometimes acted like one. I wouldn't have despised a wife because she had money, not a bit of it, but Mary Potters shall never be my wife. Once for all, I answer you

on that score. And now, if I am to catch my train, I must leave you. Dad," he said, with an anxious break in his voice, "don't send me away in anger. No money, no woman, can be worth that."

"Is that your last word?" asked the old man.

"Yes, it is my last word."

"I will not give you mine," said John Murgatroyd; "I will not give you mine. I'll not part in open anger. I will give you another chance; I will write it. Yes, before another forty-eight hours are gone by I will write you my last word down, and from that word I will never go, so long as there is a God in Heaven above us. Then I may take it it is not to be Mary Potter?"

"It cannot be Mary Potter," said Laurence.

"Then there is another? Well, we will settle it once for all; we won't quarrel about it; and when I'm dead and gone you shall know what my last word was on the subject, and till then we will everything slide, we will remain as we are. But mark my words, Laurence Murgatroyd, when once I have put pen to paper there shall be no change, no turning back; yea shall be yea, and nay, nay; and some day you may be sorry that you defied me."

CHAPTER IX.

MAKING WAY.

WHEN Laurence Murgatroyd at last left his father's room he had but time for a hurried word to Marion as he passed through the dressing-room.

"For Heaven's sake, dearest," he whispered, "do your best to smooth him down. He's on the old tack again, that I must marry money. If he's extra crotchety with you, be patient with him. Everything hangs upon your getting round him."

"Of course I'll do my best, Laurie," she said, in rather a frightened tone; "but you know, dear, if I venture to do much battle for you he will suspect at once."

"No, no, I don't mean that; but if he is upset and irritable and——"

"Oh, I'll let him work the steam off upon me as much as he likes. You know, Laurie, he is very much upset at your having to go back to the regiment, and it's not to be wondered at. But don't worry. Write to me as often as you can—

every day, if you can manage it—and come back as soon as you can possibly get leave.”

“Yes, dearest, I will certainly do that. I hate to leave you here alone, but I am leaving everything in your hands. Good-bye, my love, good-bye.”

As the sound of departing wheels died away down the avenue, Marion heard the old man calling her from the adjoining room. She went in with her calmest and most professional face and with a studied cheerfulness of manner which would have disarmed all suspicions, if he had possessed them—which he did not. In her hand she carried a small covered cup. “Now, Mr. Murgatroyd,” she said, pleasantly, “it is time for your chicken broth, and I believe it is extra good to-day.”

“I don’t care whether it is good or not, I don’t want it,” he replied, ungraciously.

“Oh, but you mustn’t let your strength get down now that Mr. Laurence is gone; you must ~~try to~~ eat everything that I bring you; and this is such good chicken broth.”

“I tell you I don’t want it,” he said, in a louder key.

“I know you don’t want it,” she replied; “it is

not a question of what you want, Mr. Murgatroyd, it is a question of what you have got to take."

"And who says must to me?"

"Well, I do," she said, coolly. "If you don't take your chicken broth, and your beef tea, and your medicine, and everything else that your doctor orders you, I shall get into trouble; and I am sure you are much too just to wish me to get into trouble with the doctor because you wouldn't do anything that I asked you to do."

"I don't want it," he said, crossly.

"No, I know you don't want it, and I know how horrid it is having to do things that you don't want to do; but you will not get well and shake off this illness unless you take this and things like it. Come, Mr. Murgatroyd, you could have disposed of it by this time."

He lay still for a minute or two, looking past her through the window at the winter landscape.

"Is it strengthening?"

"Oh, yes, most strengthening."

"Well, I will take it, since you say that of it. I want all my strength. I want to get strong and well as I used to be. Yes. I'll take it. And when

it is gone, I want you to sit down at the table there and write a letter for me."

He was too weak and suffering to feed himself, and she, with skilled and practised hands, administered the savoury liquid to him as she would have administered milk to a little child.

"There, now," she said, when she came to the last spoonful, "it was not so bad. You said you wanted me to write a letter for you?"

"Yes."

She carried the cup away, and then seated herself at the table, which stood not far from him. "Will you dictate to me, or will you tell me what kind of a letter you want written?"

"I will dictate. 'Dear Sir,—Will you be good enough to come over to see me here immediately on receipt of this? I am exceedingly ill, and wish to set my affairs in final order without delay. Circumstances have arisen which make it imperative for me to make a fresh will, and I shall be glad for you to take my instructions as soon as possible.'"

"You will sign it?" said Nurse Marion. "Or shall I do it for you?"

"I will sign it myself," he replied.

So she carried the blotting paper and the pen to the bedside, and he appended to her letter a very feeble and shaky-looking signature. Still, it was his own. He told her his lawyer's name and address, and bade her see that the letter was sent off without a moment's delay. She did his bidding, with the feeling of one who was signing her own death-warrant. He gave her no hint of his intentions, but lay brooding and unmistakably suffering during the rest of the day.

As soon as lunch was over, she went, as was her custom, to bed, leaving Mr. Murgatroyd in charge of the robust and rubicund Mrs. Mackay; yet, when at night she resumed her post, she saw that the cloud was not lifted from his face. Still, she argued, it was possible that it was merely the pang of parting, while so very ill, from his son, and, being herself also very sad at heart from the same cause, she was particularly tender and sympathetic to him.

"What made you groan like that?" she said, suddenly, as he moved uneasily in the bed.

"It was nothing—a mere twinge," he replied.

"A twinge? In your leg? Oh, don't say that

you're going to, have the pain back again. When did it come on? When did you first feel it?"

"Some time this afternoon," he returned, unwillingly.

"Oh, dear, dear!" she said, as she came back with the bottle of liniment in her hand. "How many times have you had it rubbed?"

"I haven't had it rubbed at all."

"Mr. Murgatroyd!"

He shifted uneasily under her reproachful gaze. "Well," he said at last, in a defiant tone, "she's a decent body, but she doesn't understand rubbing my leg. She's heavy-handed. I've heard women-folk say that pastry-making is a gift; well, rubbing is another gift. You've got it, and she hasn't."

"Then why," said Nurse Marion, very severely, "why could you not send for me and let me come down and do it for you?"

"Oh, I didn't want to break your rest."

"Break my rest! What's my rest to me against my patient's getting better and getting rid of me?"

He shifted still more uneasily. "Oh, as to getting rid of you," he said, "I suppose we are all

"anxious to get rid of our nurses, because it means getting rid of our illness."

"And sometimes for other reasons than that," said she.

She felt that she was making way, and, in spite of the ominous note that she had written earlier in the day, her heart went up by leaps and bounds.

"Oh, you needn't throw it at me," he said, still more ungraciously.

"Nay," said she, "I am too happy to have made myself useful to you to cavil at anything; but another time, if you want me in the day—that is to say, when I am asleep—don't hesitate to send for me. I am young and strong, and we nurses are accustomed to falling asleep the moment we lay our heads upon our pillows. It is no trial to me to come down for a little time from my sleep; indeed, to be quite candid and to speak selfishly, it would be less trouble to do that than to have all this extra pain to fight against when I do come down. So, you see, I was speaking at least one for myself, if two for you."

For some minutes John Murgatroyd lay silent, then at last he burst out, as it were, with a remark

which, coming from him, conveyed as much as volumes would have done from any other man. "Eh, but there's real grit in you," he said. "I miscalled you when you first came, you seemed such a bit of a lass."

"Thank you, Mr. Murgatroyd," she said, very quietly.

So, after all, Laurence had been right; she had got over the worst, although at that moment she did not seem to be much nearer to the object with which she came into the house. Mr. Murgatroyd was distinctly worse, in greater pain, in greater restlessness. He scarcely slept at all throughout that long night, and when the morning came he told her, as gruffly as ever he had spoken to her in his life, that she was not to leave him, that he had need of her, and that if she stayed up during the whole of the day, he would put up with Mrs. Mackay at night.

"No," said she, "I shall not leave you with Mrs. Mackay at night: you are never so well when I come down again. Mind," she added, quickly, and with her finger lifted to give impress to her words, "mind, I have not a word to say against her: she

is a good, kind, motherly, well-meanning woman, and I would go to her if I were in trouble before many others that I know of: her only fault is that she has not been properly trained in nursing. I know you thought when you first saw me that I was very young—very young indeed—to be your nurse; but, Mr. Murgatroyd, youth has nothing to do with it; one needs a natural aptitude and a great deal of training. You don't choose your head gardener because he is old and fat, you choose him for what he knows; and, as you were telling me only the other day, your gardener has won more first prizes in orchids than all the other head gardeners in the county: that is only because he learned his trade properly under a first-class master. I learned mine under the greatest physicians and surgeons of the day. The result is the same. I will stay up with you as long as you want me, and then, when you can comfortably let me go, I will get as much sleep each day as I can to carry us through the night."

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER LAST WILL.

JOHN MURGATROYD had been settled for the day, and his doctor had come and gone, when the clock struck eleven.

"Is that a carriage coming up the avenue?" he asked, suddenly.

Nurse Marion went to the window. "Yes, there is a carriage coming up the avenue," she said, quietly, "a brougham."

"Then that is Blenkinsop. I am glad he has come so soon, for I have no time to lose. You told them to show him straight up-stairs, didn't you?"

"I did, Mr. Murgatroyd."

A few minutes later the door was opened, and Mr. Murgatroyd's solicitor was ushered into the room. He was a tall, dignified old gentleman, thin and spare of figure, and clean-shaven and astute as to countenance.

"My dear sir," he said, coming to the bedside and holding out his hand, "I am sorry to find you still so ill."

"Yes, I'm very ill, Blenkinsop," said John Murgatroyd, uncompromisingly; "I'm very ill indeed. I don't think I shall get over this bout."

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense! My way, you know, takes me among a good many sick people, but you don't look to me as if you were done for, not by any means."

The lawyer was still holding the invalid's hand, and shaking it gently with a protective air, which he had in the past found extremely effective.

"Well, of course," said John Murgatroyd, "you don't know how I feel, and I feel very bad. At all events, I want to make a new will."

"Oh, a new will. Do you? Why? Are you not satisfied with the last one you made? I am sure it seemed to me very fair and equitable under the circumstances. Perhaps you want to leave your son Geoffrey——"

"I don't want to leave my son Geoffrey anything different from what I did," said the old man. "Nurse, you needn't go."

"I would rather go, Mr. Murgatroyd," said she, quietly.

"Would you? Well, I would rather you didn't.

You just stay where you are, young woman. Blenkinsop, that bit of a lass yonder is the very pest of my life—the very pest and plague of my life. It's 'she will' and 'she won't' all day long: I'm sick of it."

"Mr. Murgatroyd is very sick of me," said Nurse Marion, looking at the lawyer, "so perhaps Mr. Blenkinsop will call me when you want me."

"Mr. Blenkinsop won't do anything of the kind," said John Murgatroyd. "Sit you down, sit you down, and don't you speak a word until I speak to you again. The very pest of my life, Blenkinsop; but, more's the pity, I can't get on without her."

"Please let me go," said Marion.

"I shall do nothing of the kind. Sit still; I may want you. You've been pestering me with your attentions for days and days, and now that I want you, you can't stop in the room. Sit you down."

Thus adjured, the girl had no course open to her but to sit down on her chair again and to busy herself as best she could with a fragment of needlework. It was eminently distasteful to an honourable nature like hers to sit there listening to matters in which she was supposed to take no interest, but which, in

truth, interested her more than anything else in the world. However, she knew her patient well enough to know that further resistance would be useless, and that she would only do more harm than good by opposing his wish. Mr. Blenkinsop crossed one leg over the other and looked at his client in expectant silence.

"I am going to make a new will," said the old man. "The last one is no good. It is all right so far as Geoffrey is concerned. Geoffrey is a thorough-going bad lot, as bad a hat as ever I knew in my life. Where his badness comes from the Lord only knows; his mother was as good as gold. I may be hard, but, if I am hard, I have always been just; I may be pig-headed, and I may have flattered myself that my pig-headedness was firmness, but I have never been bad. Go from one end of the county to the other, and you will find the name of John Murgatroyd and the words 'square man' mean the same thing. My word is my bond, and always has been, and how a son of mine comes to be the dishonourable blackguard that my son Geoffrey is, the Lord above only knows. However, four hundred pounds a year I left Geoffrey in my last will, four

hundred pounds a year paid quarterly in advance as long as he lives, and that is my last word concerning him—my very last word. It is not about him I want to think; I have seen my last of him; he is bad, and always was. He was a bad baby: I'll be bound to say that Geoffrey got his teeth with more screaming fits than any child that was ever born."

"Then," said the lawyer, in his cold and deliberate voice, "it must be the greater comfort to you, my dear sir, to think that your elder son is so thoroughly what the heart of any man and father could desire."

"That's just it; he isn't."

"Eh?" in a tone of intense surprise. "Why, my dear Mr. Murgatroyd, I thought that your son Laurence was such an exceptionally good fellow. I have always understood so."

"In the sense in which you mean it, my son Laurence is good enough," said the old man, "but cursed obstinate, sir, cursed obstinate."

"It seems to me," said the lawyer, taking out his snuff-box and helping himself with calm deliberation, "that *you* ought to be very lenient to that fault. Has Laurence ever gone against you?"

"Yes, sir," the old man flashed out, "my son

Laurence has gone dead against me. I don't say that he's not an affectionate son, I don't say that he's not a credit to me; he's both; it's 'Dad' here and 'Dad' there, wait on me hand and foot, and never seems to care a hang though I should live for ever; but the one thing I want of him, he won't do for me."

"Ah! And, if it's a fair question, what is that?"

"He won't marry."

"Oh, is that all? Well, he is young; you must give him time."

"I dare say; but I want to see him married and settled. I want to know who's going to be the mistress of Murgatroyd Park. Yes, I know all that you would say, Blenkinsop—that I ought to be thinking of other things, and that it won't matter to me, when I'm gone, who is the mistress of Murgatroyd Park or whether Murgatroyd Park has a mistress or not. I dare say I ought to be thinking about other things—my latter end and all that; but I don't want to think about other things; I've made my bed, and I am content to lie upon it—both my worldly and my spiritual bed. I don't believe in whitewashing one's soul at the last minute; they that do it are they that live most

need of the whitewash ; I have none. I have lived all my life a square man, and I'll die what I have lived. But I do want to know who is coming after me ; that does matter to me."

"But you can't force the boy to marry to please you," urged the lawyer, resting his elbows on the arms of his chair and putting the tips of his fingers together in a truly professional attitude.

"I do urge it," thundered the old man. "I tell you, sir," banging his fists down upon the bedclothes, "that I have trotted out girl after girl for my son's edification, and only got laughed at for my pains. There was—oh, well, I had better not mention names, even to you—there was one girl worth a couple of hundred thousand pounds, as nice a girl as ever stepped in shoe-leather. What do you think his objection was to her? She squinted! He wouldn't look at her. The next lass only had a matter of thirty thousand pounds to her fortune, and she was as pretty-looking a girl as ever I saw, a nice, plump little thing. I'd have married her myself for half a word."

"And what objection did Laurence find to her?" asked the lawyer.

"He said her hair was red! Then there was another with something like eighty thousand, and all the fault he could find with her was that she didn't say her *h*'s properly!"

"In short, Laurence was not in love with any of them."

"In love!" said the old man contemptuously. "Can't you love one woman as much as another?"

"No," said the lawyer, "I don't think you can."

"What do you know about it?" growled the patient. "You've never been married."

"No, I haven't," returned the lawyer, promptly, "but if one woman would have done as well as another I should have been. Come, come, Mr. Murgatroyd, you've got a fine young fellow for your heir, honest and straight and true, everything that a father's heart could wish for: don't spoil it by worrying about his marriage."

"I will worry about his marriage!" thundered John Murgatroyd. "I didn't ask you to come here for your advice, Blenkinsop, but to take my instructions for a new will. If you can't take those instructions I'll send for a lawyer who can."

"Tut, tut, tut! hoity-toity!" exclaimed Mr.

Blenkinsop. "What! are you going to quarrel with me, your friend of forty years' standing, my dear sir?"

"Will you take my instructions?" roared the old man.

"Certainly, I will take your instructions; but it is my duty, as your lawyer and as your friend, to point out where I think you may be somewhat warped in your judgment."

"Put down all that blithering rubbish as to my mind being sound," John Murgatroyd went on, disdaining to notice further the lawyer's words: "put it down, and draw up the will in this wise: 'To my son Geoffrey I leave for life four hundred pounds a year, to be paid quarterly in advance under the same conditions and trusts and so on as the last will I made. To my son Laurence I leave everything of which I die possessed, on one condition—that within two years of my death he is married to a lady with not less than twenty thousand pounds to her own fortune. Within two years. During the two years he is to have the income of all my property; at the end of two years from my death, if he is not married in accordance

'with my wish, let everything, every farthing of my real and personal estate, be divided between the County Hospital at Burghley and the Asylum for Idiots.' "

The lawyer leaned forward with his elbows upon his knees. "And, if I remember rightly, your last will provided certain legacies for your servants, labourers, and so on."

"Let that all stand as it was: I can't better that," said John Murgatroyd, "except that you can put in yon lassie's name for one hundred pounds."

"Does that mean me, Mr. Murgatroyd?" said Nurse Marion, looking up.

"Ay."

"I am very sorry—it is most kind of you—but cannot take it."

"And why not?"

"Because I cannot."

"Will not, you mean."

"Will not, if you put it so."

"Why?"

"I don't think that I need state my reason."

"I wish to know it."

She rose from her chair and poured out a lit-

water into a glass, afterwards dropping into it a certain quantity of colourless medicine. "You are exciting yourself very much by this business," she said, reproachfully, as she held the glass to his lips.

John Murgatroyd took it and drained its contents without a word.

"Why won't you take my bit of a legacy?" he asked. "What's your reason?"

"Because," she said, eyeing him boldly, yet without any offensiveness or defiance in her tone, "because sitting here I have heard every word that you have uttered. The will you are about to make is not a just will, and I should not care to accept a legacy from you."

"You will take that legacy, and you will sign that will," put in John Murgatroyd.

"That is impossible," put in the lawyer: "nobody who benefits under the will can witness your signature."

"Then," said John Murgatroyd, looking at neither lawyer nor nurse, but straight in front of him, "then you can leave out the lassie's name, and she shall sign it."

CHAPTER XI.

IN A CLEFT STICK!

FULL of most righteous indignation, Nurse Marion wrote to her husband a detailed account of the latest development of affairs at Murgatroyd Park.

"Of course he does not know," she said, "he does not realise the exquisite refinement of cruelty which the situation affords me. There had I to sit listening to these details of the will by which you are to be done out of your rightful inheritance—the inheritance which you have done nothing legitimately to forfeit—and I am to put the coping-stone upon this deed of cruelty by signing the will which will deprive you of your rights. My dear boy, if we were to read it in a book we should say that such a situation was too improbable and too preposterous to be true, and yet it is, alas! true enough—too true. I see no prospect before us but one of hopeless ruin for you because you married me."

In reply to this letter, Laurence Murgatroyd wrote back in a very hopeful strain.

"My dear child," he said, "pray do not distress

yourself about this new freak of my father's. He is rather fond of making wills—I have known him to make quite a dozen—and, after all, even supposing that this one stands, things would not be so bad as you imagine. He gives me two years to find this heiress, and he gives me the whole of his income during that time. My father is very rich, much richer than Murgatroyd Park would lead you to suppose; if we have to give it up in the end we shall not be destitute. On the whole, your letter has put me into excellent spirits, for you might have had much worse news to send me. I am not sure, indeed, that I have not an inkling that a scheme might be arranged by which we could comply with his conditions. At all events, although I may have been very anxious, so that I was almost brutal to you, never think, if the worst comes to the worst, that I should grudge our marriage or in any way visit my reverses upon you. After all, in that case, it is you who have the right to cry out upon me, though I know your generosity too well to fear that."

It is almost impossible to describe how entirely that letter comforted the girl. So far as she was concerned, poverty had little or no terror for her;

she had never known what it was to be rich, and her only dread of 'spending the rest of her life in continual anxiety as to ways and means was that Laurence might in time come to regard her as the destroyer of his worldly prospects rather than as the arbiter of his happiness.

The peace in her heart communicated itself to her whole atmosphere. In voice, manner, looks, she was changed from the indignant girl who had boldly spoken up against what she believed to be an injustice.

"You are mighty cheerful this morning," said John Murgatroyd to her on the third day after the visit of Mr. Blenkinsop.

"Yes, I feel cheerful," was the reply.

"And what have you had to make you feel cheerful? I have been more disagreeable than usual."

"Yes, you've been very trying," said she, promptly.

"I have had enough to try me."

"Most of us have enough to try us," said she, quietly.

"I dare say we have. We don't feel other people's annoyances. You don't feel mine, or you wouldn't be so cheerful this morning."

"I don't consider ~~that~~ you have any annoyances, beyond your illness."

"Oh, don't you? Well, I do." I had a letter from Laurence this morning; he can't get leave."

"Is that so?"

"He could get leave if he liked."

"I doubt it," said she.

"You nursed him?"

"Yes."

"And he was very ill?"

"Yes, he was very ill. It was one of the nearest shaves I ever pulled through."

For a minute or two the old man lay silent. "Did you see anything to lead you to suspect that my son was—er—was—er—attached to any one?"

"I nursed your son, Mr. Murgatroyd," said Nurse Marion, coolly, "but if you wish to know whether I read his private letters during that time I can only tell you that I did not."

"But—well—did any ladies come to see him?" He was not the least abashed by her implied rebuke.

"Yes, lots of ladies came to see him."

"Oh, they did, did they? Who?"

"His colonel's wife, for one, and several of the other married ladies."

"I didn't mean married ladies; I meant girls—such as he would be likely to marry—to be in love with."

"I didn't see any."

"You do not think there is any affair on with any of the others?"

"If you mean to ask whether I thought your son was in love with any of the married ladies who came to see him when he was ill, I did not, Mr. Murgtroyd. Sometimes they came with their husband sometimes without, but I was always there."

"You never left him?"

"No."

"I see. Were you the only nurse?"

"Oh, no: it was much too serious a case for one nurse to manage single-handed."

"Ah! Then you don't think my son is attached to anybody."

"As to that," said Nurse Marion, very quietly, "I should be sorry to say one way or another. If he is, he would be the person who could best tell you."

"Yes, but I am not going to ask him."

"If he is," Nurse Marion went on, "and it is some one without money, the will that you are making will either ruin their happiness or plunge them for the rest of their lives into comparative poverty. It was because I felt this that I objected to sign it."

"But you will sign it?"

"I would prefer not to do so. It can make no difference to you whether the will is signed by me or by another."

"It makes all the difference in the world," said John Murgatroyd. "And you will sign that will. The doctor will be the other witness. With doctor and nurse as witnesses, nobody would dare to call in question the state of my mind."

"I see," said she, thoughtfully. "So Dr. Jellicoe and I are to set the seal of our professional knowledge upon this act of injustice. I don't think, Mr. Murgatroyd, that that is using either of us in a fair way. I came here, by your son's wish, to do my best to pull you through a very serious illness; I am pulling you through it; you will not die this time. Don't you think you are making me do him a very ill turn when you insist upon my signing this document?"

"No," he said, "I don't think that it can matter to you one way or another. My son has two courses open to him."

"Hobson's choice," she put in.

"Perhaps so, but there is a choice, and he must follow which line he pleases."

It was early the following morning that Mr. Blenkinsop arrived at Murgatroyd Park, bringing with him the completed will—completed, that is to say, so far that it was entirely ready for attestation.

"Read it over to me," said John Murgatroyd, authoritatively.

"It is precisely in accordance with your instructions," said Mr. Blenkinsop.

"I have no doubt of that, but read it to me. I know your time is precious, doctor; you needn't shuffle in your chair. I want you to hear that will read before I sign it; I don't want to have any dispute, after I am gone, about the state of my mind."

"My dear sir," said the doctor, "your mind is as clear at this moment as it has ever been in your life; if anything it is too clear. I am quite willing to sign the will without hearing it read, and

nobody, I take it, will venture, in the face of my signature, to question your sanity."

John Murgatroyd, however, insisted upon his waiting, and the impatient doctor, with whom time was money, was compelled to sit with what show of patience he could while Mr. Blenkinsop slowly and impressively read out the formal and ambiguously worded clauses which would help to make Laurence Murgatroyd practically a beggar. When he came to the end of the reading his voice died away into silence. It was John Murgatroyd who broke it.

"Well?" he said, impatiently. He looked at nobody in particular, and nobody answered him.

"Well?" he said, again.

"To whom are you speaking?" said the doctor.

"That is my will," said Mr. Murgatroyd.

"Well, my dear sir, then the sooner you put your name to it and let me go away to see my other patients, the better."

"And you have no doubt of my sanity?" said John Murgatroyd.

"No, I have no doubt of your sanity," said the doctor, brusquely. "I had rather not tell you my opinion—what I do think."

“I should like to know it.”

“My business is to treat you medically,” said the doctor, roughly. “I have nothing to do with your property, or how you dispose of it.”

“I should like your opinion.”

“I don’t know the circumstances of the case,” said the doctor, who could be quite as pig-headed as John Murgatroyd when the fit took him. “I take it that your son objects to marry from mercenary reasons.”

“My son, sir, objects to marry anybody that is pleasing me, and I am not such a fool as to be put off by excuses about squints, and red hair, and *h*’s, and such-like things. I know well enough there is somebody else, and I mean my son to marry a certain amount of money.”

“Oh, well, then there is nothing more to be said,” said the doctor, deliberately.

“There is something more to be said. This will may be called into question when I am dead and gone: I should like you, as my medical adviser, who may have to testify to my sanity one day, to understand my reasons for making such a will.”

“Oh, your reasons are simple enough. You’ve

got a lot of money, and you want your son to add a little more to it. It's all a matter of taste. He evidently doesn't want to; and small blame to him! But all this, my dear sir, is no business of mine, and all my patients who are waiting for me at this moment are my business: so if you will be good enough to put your signature to the will and let me put mine—since you've got the fad that you want me to sign—I shall be much obliged to you."

"But you——"

"Look here," said the doctor, as John Murgatroyd broke off sharp and looked at him inquiringly. "I know what you want: you want me to say that I approve of this will. Well, I don't. I think when you've made it and signed it you will be wretched; you won't know an easy minute till you've burned it. A parent has no right to coerce a child, girl or boy, in the most important matter of his whole life: a man's marriage is for himself. You want me to say that I approve of that will, that I think it is a just will and that you've a perfect right to make it. I think nothing of the kind. I will sign it, because if I don't sign it you will get somebody else who will—your butler, or your footman, or

your gardener, or one of your people—but say I think it right I won't, it is not just or right, and you know it as well as I do. You'll not rest when you've made it, and if you die leaving it behind you, you won't rest in your grave afterwards. Now, is that plain?"

"Yes, damn it," said the old man, "it is plain. Give me the pen, Blenkinsop. Let me sign, and let me get this prating platitudinizer out of my sight."

The lawyer brought a thick blotting-pad from the writing-table and pen and ink to the bedside of the old man, and Nurse Marion stood by in intense excitement, with strained eyes and lips drawn feverishly over her teeth, while the old man appended his signature to the fatal paper. This done, the doctor, who was heartily sick of the whole business, signed after the testator; then he looked at Mr. Blenkinsop and handed the pen to him.

"Yon nurse will sign," said John Murgatroyd.

"I cannot sign," said she.

"Nonsense! Sign at once!" exclaimed the old man.

"No, no, I cannot sign, I refuse to sign that will. There are plenty of people in the house. Oh, I wil

say you are sane enough, but I will not sign, Mr. Murgatroyd; I gave you my reasons yesterday. It is an unjust will. I refuse to put my hand to a will which I believe to be unjust. It cannot be part of my duty to sign a thing which I believe to be wicked. Your doctor is different. He signed it because—because he didn't mind. I do mind. I will not sign."

"Sign it, I tell you," thundered the old man.

"No; I will not sign. There are the butler, the footman, the housekeeper, all people who have known you for years and years and years, people much better able to judge whether you are in your right mind than I am: there can be no necessity for me to do this. Let me ring the bell for William."

"William will not do," said Mr. Blackinsop. "He benefits under the will, and he was not present when Mr. Murgatroyd signed. There is no question of your sanity, my dear sir; you are as sane as you are obstinate. I have already told you so, your doctor has told you so; nobody can go against us in such a matter."

"I want the lass to sign," said the old man.

"I won't sign," said Marion, drawing herself up and eyeing the old man indignantly.

"Why won't you sign?" asked the doctor.

"Because Mr. Murgatroyd brought me here to nurse his father. I had nursed him before; I had given him every satisfaction; he thought that if anybody could help to pull his father through this illness I was that person; he was good enough to have faith in me. This will will destroy all his prospects in life, or may destroy them all, and it savours too much of biting the hand that feeds you for me to sign this document. You must not ask me to do it: I distinctly and decidedly refuse."

"In that case," said Mr. Blenkinsop, "much as I object to witnessing wills that I have made, I see no help for it but to sign in this instance. Now, doctor, you are free."

CHAPTER XII.

BY THE LIGHT OF A CANDLE.

WHEN the lawyer and the doctor had departed from Murgatroyd Park, leaving John Murgatroyd not a little exhausted by the events of the morning,

Nurse Marion put her patient in charge of Mrs. Mackay, with definite instructions for his welfare, and prepared to take air and rest until the evening.

"Stop here; I want you," said the old man.

"Yes?" Her voice was gentle, and nobody would have believed the hard fight that she had been through earlier in the day.

"Where are you going?"

"I was going to drive into Burghley; there are one or two things I want. I am too tired to walk."

"There is no need for you to walk; there are horses eating their heads off in the stables, and men-servants idling around till they are bound to get into mischief. Who wants you to walk? Do you know what you are?"

"I think so," she said, smiling a little.

"You're a stuck-up, obstinate minx, and I'll be even with you yet for standing against me in my own house like you did this morning. To think that John Murgatroyd, who never stood on one side for man or beast, should have to give in at the bidding of a young lass like you! It's preposterous!"

"But you didn't give in," said she.

"I signed the will, if that's what you mean; but you didn't sign it after me."

"No, but Mr. Blenkinsop signed it, and his signature was respectable enough for anybody."

"And why didn't you sign?"

"Because your will was unjust, Mr. Murgatroyd. With your leave, I will go out now. I said my say this morning; I have nothing to add to it."

In a moment the nervous old fingers had closed round her wrist. "You'll come back again?" he said, entreatingly. "You're not going away?"

"Oh, no!" she replied, laughing outright at the suggestion. "Because you are unjust to your son is no reason that I should be untrue to my trust. Oh, I shall come back, Mr. Murgatroyd, come back to plague the very life out of you with beef tea and chicken broth and medicines and all the rest of it. Don't flatter yourself that you've got rid of me yet, or that you are going to die this journey. I mean to keep you alive, and to have you well and strong, so that you may live to see what a mistake you made this morning. Now, Mrs. Mackay, you will remember that you go by the chart, as I leave it here, and don't you let Mr. Murgatroyd put you off

about his chicken broth, nor yet his beef tea. He is to take them to the last drain. He'll get out of it if he can; that is his way. I've written it all down, and do you see that he doesn't thwart you as he always tries to thwart me."

The motherly Scotchwoman promised a faithful observance of the instructions which Nurse Marion had laid upon her, and half an hour afterwards the latter was driving down the avenue behind the handsome pair of horses, for which nowadays there was little use. Between excitement and overwork, her head was aching furiously, and it was with a sense of thankfulness that she felt the sharp winter wind upon her face. She wanted, too, to be quiet, to be able to think over without interruption the events of the past few days. Well, she had done her best, and, as Laurence had said, not so many weeks ago, it had been a very poor best. In a way the old man was getting fond of her, he depended on her, he trusted her, but it was only as a nurse—nothing more. She had come to Murgatroyd Park to carry out a specific object; she had failed hideously. Well, the die was cast now; they would have a pittance—what would seem almost like

riches to her, what would be a mere pittance to him. For herself, she knew that she could be happy in one barack room with the love of her heart, the man of her choice ; but with men it was different. Laurence was neither better nor worse than others of his kind. He loved her, it was true, yet when that love meant going without all that had made his life, or nearly all that had made his life, when it meant the curtailing of his hunting, his shooting, his polo, and all the other pursuits which were the small change of men in his position, she was not sure then how things would go. There might come a day when he would look at her and say, "But for you, I might have had all these things ; but for you, Murgatroyd Park would be mine, and all my father's thousands would be mine—but for you " Well, she told herself, with a sigh, it was no use thinking over these things, no use bridging over trouble that was not yet actually upon her, no use meeting the clouds half-way.

She had snatched ten minutes in which to write to Laurence ; she held the letter in her hand at that moment, and so she sat back in the luxurious carriage and gave herself up to the actual comfort

of it. She was so alive to the necessity of nursing her strength that when she got into Burghley she stopped at the principal pastry-cook's and treated herself to afternoon tea, having given the coachman a shilling and told him to get himself a glass of beer. She enjoyed the dainty little tea as a child might have done, posted her letter to Laurence, and, having made one or two small purchases and seen all that there was to be seen in the shop windows, she went to the hotel where the carriage usually put up and told the coachman that she was ready to start for home. By that time it was almost dark, yet she enjoyed the drive home almost as much as she had done the "drive into Burghley.

"Yes, I will have my dinner at once," she replied to the question which the butler put to her, "and then I will get a few hours' sleep before Mrs. Mackay is ready to go. I will just run up and see Mr. Murgatroyd. I shall be down again by the time cook has served my dinner."

She found the invalid's room very quiet. A shaded lamp burned beside the bed, another stood on the table near the fire by which Mrs. Mackay sat nodding over her needle-work.

"What! are you only just back?" said the old man.

"Yes, indeed; I have been gadding all over Burghley," said Nurse Marion, brightly. "I treated myself to tea at the confectioner's, and I looked in the shop-windows, and altogether I feel quite brisk and fresh. By the time that I have had my dinner and an hour or two's sleep I shall be as fresh as a daisy. Did you take your chicken broth?"

"Oh, I've taken everything!" said he, impatiently. "To-morrow I am going to have no chicken broth; I am going to have some chicken, you see if I don't. Here, I want you to do something for me. Take my keys," feeling aimlessly under the pillow—"yes, they're under there somewhere: now, that's the key. Put it into the safe in the dressing room—you know the door I mean—turn it three times to the right, and push, and then bring me that paper I signed this morning: I want to look at it again."

"You want to burn it," said Nurse Marion, quietly.

"No, I don't; I only want to look at it. Old Blenkinsop wanted to take it away to be under lock

and key in his own place, but, as I told him, he has no better locks and keys in his office than I have got in my dressing-room. Three turns to the right, and push."

She lighted a candle and went into the dressing-room, carrying out his simple instructions with such obedience that the next moment the door of the safe stood open before her. It was a large safe, with several compartments. Nurse Marion did not stop to scrutinize any of these, for immediately before her was a packet endorsed "Last Will and Testament of John Murgatroyd," and the date was that very day. Hastily relocking the safe, she carried the will back to the testator, then, replacing the keys under his pillow, blew out the candle and departed in search of her dinner.

So the days went on, and John Murgatroyd suffered less, but did not make very rapid progress towards recovery, notwithstanding the close care and attention which Nurse Marion lavished on him. It was a very lonely life. Laurence could not get another day's leave, and Mr. Murgatroyd saw no visitors at all. So Nurse Marion's only distraction was to drive into Burghley and have tea at the

pastry-cook's. At first her patient chaffed her not a little about her sweet tooth, but if he was obstinate he was not mean, and he told her that in future she was to take his purse and pay for her tea out of it.

"It's a dull life here for a bit of a lass like you," he said, in his brusque way. "For my part, I can't tell why you women should always be wanting slops of tea and such-like; however, if it pleases you to take your meal there instead of here, there's no reason why you should pay for it yourself, and if you want lollipops there's no reason that I know of why you shouldn't have 'em; but I'd prefer to pay for them myself: so take my purse and help yourself to what's necessary."

At first she felt inclined to demur, but, as she was as desirous as ever of making a good impression and not letting his liking for her slip back, she quietly accepted the situation as it stood.

Now, it happened one day, when she had left him comfortably on his bedroom sofa with plenty of books and papers and Mrs. Mackay in attendance, that she ventured to stay out a little longer than usual. Scarcely did she stay purposely; rather was she by Christmas novelties and such-like things

beguiled into letting the time slip by. When she returned home, in answer to her usual question it all was well, the butler, William, told her that he had not long come down from his master's room, and that Mrs. Mackay was in hall having her tea.

"But why so late?" said Nurse Marion. "And why has she gone down for it?"

"Oh, it was just a freak of the master's," William answered. "He told her that she would be enjoying her tea better down-stairs, and that he was quite well enough to be left now; he would ring if he wanted anything. I've been up twice," the man added, "so that he's all right. He was asleep both times."

It was therefore with no feeling of apprehension that Nurse Marion mounted the stairs with her purchases in her arms. She gained the head of the staircase and entered Mr. Murgatroyd's room. He was sound asleep upon the sofa, and the light was turned down very low. She was about to creep softly out again, when a slight sound in the adjoining room made her turn her steps thither. To her astonishment, she saw a man, with a candle in his hand, standing at the door of the open safe. She went forward.

“Laurence !” she cried, in a tone of the utmost astonishment.

But the next instant the light went out, she felt herself thrust on one side, and heard the closing of the door into the corridor.

CHAPTER XIII.

REPROACH !

It was but the work of a moment for Nurse Marion to strike a match and light a candle.

The door of the safe stood wide open : some of the papers on the first shelf had been slightly disarranged, and one or two had fallen to the floor. The keys lay upon the shelf, and the inner compartments had not been opened. Quick as thought, and with a view of shielding Laurence, she pushed the papers into place and locked the safe, then, with the keys in her shaking hand, she went into the adjoining room, to see whether her patient had been in any way disturbed. No, he was lying there quietly. She put the candle down upon a table and approached the sofa, and, as she did so, the fire, which had burned dully red, suddenly fell in, sending a brilliant flame half-way up the chimney.

She knew as well as possible what Laurence had done: he had got a few days' leave and had come down as a surprise both to his father and to herself, had walked in quietly, had found her away and his father alone, and the temptation to do away with that will had been too much for him. Her only instinct was to keep quiet until she could obtain possession of it again and replace it.

As the brilliant flame shot up through the room, she turned again to the invalid's couch. To her dying day she never knew what it was that made her look at her patient more closely. Be the cause what it might, having once looked at him she realized that something very dreadful had happened. It was no living man that lay stretched upon that couch.

The next moment she had flown to the bell, and was almost tearing it down in her efforts to summon assistance. It seemed hours ere William and one or two of the servants came running up, followed a minute or two later by panting and breathless Mrs. Mackay. In reality the butler had reached his master's bedroom in less time than it has taken to write these words.

"Oh, William!" she gasped, "something dreadful has happened! Why, why did Mrs. Mackay leave him?"

"Lor', nurse, what is it?" cried William, open-mouthed with terror.

"Dead, William, dead!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"Never, nurse!"

"Oh, it is too true! it is too true! Why did I go out? why did I leave him? Oh, these women! they are never to be trusted."

"It was the master's orders," gasped Mrs. Mackay.

"The master's orders!" Nurse Marion cried, in an anguish of apprehension. "Do you think I ever took his orders? No! I should have gone out of the house long since if I had done that."

"Would it have made any difference if she had stayed, nurse?" said William, sensibly, as he stood looking with awed eyes down upon his master's inanimate form.

"Oh, yes, yes, it would have made all the difference."

"Are you sure he is dead? Here, John, you go

off for the doctor. Tell Jorkins to give you the fastest horse in the stable, and don't you come back without him, or another one if you can't find him. Hadn't we better do something?" he added anxiously to Nurse Marion.

"No," said she, and her words carried conviction with them. "You can do what you like till dooms-day, you will never awaken Mr. Murgatroyd. He is dead." Perhaps it was something in the man's face which brought a merciful professional instinct to her aid. "Mr. Murgatroyd is dead," she repeated, "but we must not leave anything undone. Get me a looking-glass." As she spoke she was unfastening the collar of his warm padded dressing-gown, that she might lay her hand over his heart and make sure that its beating was stilled for ever. "You," speaking to one of the maids, "chafe that hand, and you the other. Mrs. Mackay, get his socks off. You," turning to a third scared maid-servant, "run down with that hot-water bag and get it filled with boiling water at once. It is no use, but we cannot stay here like a pack of dummies until the doctor comes, perhaps an hour hence. Yes, William, hold it over his mouth—so." She was busy pouring

some drops of sal-volatile into a medicine-glass, and, after adding a very small quantity of water she came back to the side of the couch. "Let me see," she said, taking the hand-mirror from the shaking hand of the butler. "Oh, it is no use! Help me to get this between his lips; it may do it." And all the time she knew that he was dead.

The glass was undimmed; the medicine trickled slowly over the side of the helpless month; the heart was still, the hands were rapidly losing their flexibility. John Murgatroyd was dead; had died, no one knew when, and scarcely how. At last Nurse Marion ceased her efforts and staggered back to the nearest chair.

"William," she said, "it is no use carrying on this farce any longer. Mr. Murgatroyd is dead. Oh, why did I go to Burghley to-day? Why did I leave him?"

"Nurse," said the butler, speaking more in the tone of an equal than he had ever yet addressed her, "I don't see that you've anything to reproach yourself with where master's concerned. I'm sure poor master," with a glance at the figure on the couch, "would be the first to say so. You came to him in."

the worst of his illness, and you stuck to him single-handed through thick and thin, and master he said to me only this morning, he said, 'William,' he said, 'yon little lass'—yes, nurse, that was how he spoke of you—'yon little lass is one in a thousand, and I want you,' said he, 'to go into Burguley for me to-morrow and buy her something pretty for Christmas.' No, nurse, you've nothing to reproach yourself with where Mr. Murgatroyd is concerned."

"I oughtn't to have left him," she exclaimed, holding her trembling chin in her hand and rocking herself miserably to and fro. "I oughtn't to have left him."

"Nay, now, nurse, it would have happened just the same if you'd been here. Master's time was come, nurse: there's no need for you to reproach yourself for having left him to take your proper rest and exercise."

"No," broke in the sobbing voice of the under-keeper's mother, "it was me that should not have left him, puir gentleman, but he seemed so weel, and he bade me so cheerful and kindly to get down to my tea; and William he cam' up to spier at him twa times——" And then the poor old woman

threw her apron over her head and broke into violent sobbing.

"It's no use your crying like that," said Nurse Marion; "it's all of our faults—nobody in particular, but every one of us. We were all here with nothing else to do, and we let him die among us. Oh, here's the doctor."

The doctor, however, had but little to add to the general verdict. They all knew that Mr. Murgatroyd was dead, and he confirmed the knowledge.

"I am not at all surprised," he said, when he had heard the several stories and had examined the dead man. "Mr. Murgatroyd was in that state of health when this might have happened at any moment. That he happened to be alone was unfortunate. I doubt if he knew anything about it; I should say that he had dozed off and had slipped away in his sleep. For months past Mr. Murgatroyd had suffered from a very pronounced heart complaint, and latterly, as you know, nurse, that has been the chief trouble with which we have had to battle. Anything might have carried him off—the sudden closing of a door, the unexpected arrival of a friend, the most trivial cause. Any shock would certainly have been fatal to him."

" "Any shock!" The words seemed to beat into Nurse Marion's very brain, and she kept her shaking hand tight over her trembling mouth in a vain attempt to hide the horrible agitation which possessed her. Nothing, however, escaped the keen eyes of the doctor.

"Come, come, nurse," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder and patting her kindly, "you mustn't take it like this. You are upset with what has happened while you were out, but you are only human, and sleep and fresh air are as necessary to you as nursing and medicine were to him. You have nothing to reproach yourself with whatever."

"But I do reproach myself, doctor," she said, hastily rising and going towards the fireplace, where she stood hiding her face again. "If I had been at home—if I had stayed here—this would not have happened."

"If you had been at home," said the doctor, "you would have been in bed; and if you had been in the room it is most probable that it would have happened just the same. There is certainly the bare possibility that sal-volatile, administered on the instant, might have warded off the seizure, but

it is most unlikely that you would have noticed when the faintness came over him. It is most unfortunate, and it is very distressing and uncomfortable for all of you, but, at the same time, Mr. Murgatroyd was a doomed man; his life was hanging in the balance, and its duration was a question of weeks at the very utmost. Come, now, nurse, you had better go to bed at once, and I will send you a composing draught."

"I shall not go to bed," said Marion, "until all is done that is my duty. It is the last that I can do for him now."

No, her own heart said to her, it was not the last service that she could render him. It was several hours before she was able to sit down to think over the awful knowledge that had come to her, to go over that last scene, when Laurence had crept into his father's house, into his father's room, had killed him by the shock of his entrance, had rifled his pockets of the keys—of which the key of the safe was one—and had deliberately stolen—yes, that was the word, stolen—the will, which would ruin them. He had put out the light, he had thrust her on one side, he had gone; nobody had seen him, nobody

had suspected that he had been there. Well, it was merciful; nobody must suspect, nobody must ever know. The will would be sought for; what must she say? what should she say? what could she say? After all, it was no business of hers; it was nothing to her; she was not interested in it. But the horror of the situation grew and grew upon her, until she had, in sheer self-defence, to dig her nails into the palms of her hands, to press her teeth hard upon her under-lip to keep herself from screaming aloud. To think that Laurence—Laurie, the man she had loved, her husband—had done this dastardly thing! Worse than all, to think that he had done it for love of her, for her sake; to think that she had dragged him into the necessity for doing it! She beat her hands together and hated herself. She had never known what it was to hate herself before. But she must keep the secret; she must lock her door at night, so that nobody could come in and hear her talking in her sleep. She must watch every word, every look, and every gesture that escaped her, lest in her anxiety she should unconsciously give Laurence—her husband—away, and fix his crime upon him. For it was a

crime—a hideous, black, cowardly, dastardly crime! Oh, she would save him; yes, she would save him, because it was partly her fault, her unconscious fault, but her fault all the same.

CHAPTER XIV.

WAITING!

It was just ten o'clock when Marion appeared in the breakfast-room the next morning. The sight of her own white face in the glass above the fireplace frightened her, and William, who was looking extremely subdued, set a chair for her with much sympathy of manner.

“There is no answer from Mr. Laurence yet,” he remarked, as he took the silver cover off the bacon-dish.

“No answer? What do you mean?”

“Well, nurse, we telegraphed this morning, as soon as the office at Burghley was open, to let Mr. Laurence know. He has not replied yet.”

“Why didn't you send last night?”

“It was no use. By the time we had got our scared senses together it was too late to send a telegram. There is no all-night office within twelve

miles. James did suggest sending over to Grimthorpe, but I didn't see the good. Ill news travels fast enough, and Mr. Laurence will be rare and cut up at the master's going like that."

"Oh, yes," said Marion; "there could not be the least need for driving twelve miles to send such news an hour or two earlier. He could not have got here during the night. There is nothing to be gained by haste at such times. It was not as if he were still alive."

She had not finished her breakfast, however, when William returned, bringing a telegram upon a salver.

"It will be from Mr. Laurence," he remarked, and waited to hear the contents.

"Yes, it is from Mr. Laurence," said Marion, checking a strong desire to clinch the flimsy bit of paper into her hand. "You can read it."

"NURSE MARION, Murgatroyd Park, near Burghley," William read, in slow and unctuous tones. "Utterly shocked; starting immediately.

"LAURENCE MURGATROYD."

"Ay, I knew he'd feel it, Mr. Laurence. 'Utterly shocked.' Yes, I should think he was. 'Starting immediately.' Well, nurse, I'd better go and look

out trains and see when he's likely to get here. I should think he'd come by the six-forty. He can't get here without going to London."

"I can't say, I'm sure. He'll probably telegraph," said Marion, trying to hide her face behind her coffee-cup. That he had evidently got back to Blankhampton in time to receive the news only increased her sense of his duplicity.

"Not unlikely. Well, I'll go and tell Jorkins that the brougham will be wanted some time during the day."

So there was a long, dreadful day to be got through. She could make no arrangements for the funeral; she had nothing to do, nowhere to go, nobody to whom she could talk, except the old housekeeper, who was slowly and shakily recovering from her illness, and who had no other topic of conversation than her dead master. There was no mourning to be ordered except for the women-servants, and, being only the nurse, Marion could not take that duty upon herself. There was nothing to do, except to see the doctor and the lawyer, who came over together during the course of the morning. She went up-stairs with them, while Mr. Blenkinsop took his last look at his old friend and client.

"You had better give me his keys, nurse," he said, as he turned away from the body, in a voice which he tried hard to make emotionless and ordinary.

"Dr. Jellicoe took them last night," replied Marion.

"Where were they?"

"I took them out of our poor friend's pocket," said Dr. Jellicoe. "I thought it better, as there was no member of the family present, and as I happened to know that the will was in the safe—to say nothing of other things. I took them away with me."

"Quite right; quite right. Well, if you will give me the advantage of your presence for five minutes I will look over the will and take it away. It is a most unjust will—the most unjust thing that I ever knew my poor old friend do, and more was the pity he was so keenly set upon it. Let me see, the key of the safe—I think that is it."

Marion stood by, not knowing whether to go or stay. She was afraid that if she left the room, as she certainly would have done under ordinary circumstances, the action might be construed afterwards into a cowardly shrinking from facing the worst: so she stayed there, leaning against a bureau

and striving to seem calm and composed. She knew, poor girl, perfectly well which was the key of the safe, but she did not help the lawyer by making any parade of her knowledge.

At last Mr. Blenkinsop found it, and the great iron door swung slowly back upon its hinges. He turned over the few papers which came immediately to hand, but there was no sign of the will.

"Dear me!" he said, "I put it down just there; I never opened the inner cupboards. I don't see it."

"Mr. Murgatroyd had the will out after you put it away," said Marion.

"Oh, had he? When?"

"The same night that he signed it."

"Ah, you don't say so! Do you think he destroyed it?"

"I don't think so," said Marion, "for I put it back again."

"Did he have it again?"

"Yes, he had it out again."

"Did you put it back again?"

"I did. And each time I laid it just where I found it--where you yourself put it."

"Do you think that Mrs. Mackay got papers out of that safe for him?"

“I cannot say. I dare say she is downstairs; shall I send for her?”

“If you would be so kind. The will is certainly missing. Do you think that Mr. Murgatroyd was inclined to destroy it?”

“I don’t know. I asked him the first day whether he wanted to burn it, and he said, ‘No,’ and afterwards I replaced it, as I told you.”

She crossed the room and rang the bell as she spoke. When the housemaid appeared in reply to the summons, she asked if Mrs. Mackay was below, and if so if she would tell her to come up-stairs at once.

The under-keeper’s rotund mother was downstairs, not, indeed, having been at home since Mr. Murgatroyd’s death. She came into the dressing-room with a scared look on her broad red face.

“Mrs.—Mrs.—Mackay, yes, Mrs. Mackay, during the times that you were in attendance on Mr. Murgatroyd,” began the lawyer, “did he ever send you to the safe for him?”

“That he did, sir,” was the ready reply. “And I said to the master, said I, that I didna like intermeddling wi’ papers and valuables; and he said to me there were no valuables in the safe forbye such

as were to be foond in the inner pain^ts, o' which he hadna gien me the key."

"And you gave him——?"

"I gied him ilka time a blue paper that he tellt me I should find on the shelf just there."

"And did you put it back afterwards?"

"I think I did, sir."

"Did you go to the safe yesterday afternoon?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"Very good, Mrs. Mackay: that will do."

"Now, doctor," said the lawyer, "there is one question I want to put to you. Was it physically possible for John Murgatroyd, when left alone, to have got up and fetched the will for himself?"

"Perfectly possible. He could walk a few steps, nurse?"

"He walked from the bed to the so'a yesterday, sir. Of course he was shaky and I gave him my arm, but he could have walked by himself?"

"Then, depend upon it," said the lawyer, "that his reason for sending Mrs. Mackay down to her tea was that he might go to the safe, get out that will, and put it into the fire without anybody knowing anything about it."

Marion began to breathe more freely. If only he would go on thinking that, the hideous truth need never come out.

"Then how will the property go?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, that is a very simple matter. When he gave me instructions to make that absurd will by which Laurence was tied up to marry an heiress, I carried his former will away in my pocket, and it is at my office now."

"And that will hold good?"

"Certainly."

"And how is the property left in that?"

"Oh, practically everything is left to Laurence, with various legacies, and an annuity to the younger son."

Mr. Blenkinsop, having satisfied himself that the will was not in any of the other inner compartments, locked up the safe again and put the keys in his pocket. Then the two went downstairs and were hospitably pressed by William to take a glass of wine. The rest of their conversation was lost to Marion, because she had no excuse for following them. Still, she saw them

go away together, the one getting into his comfortable little brougham, the other tearing away ahead in his smart dog-cart.

She was alone again, and breathed more freely. So the greatest danger seemed almost to be overpast : they had no suspicion, these two, of the way in which John Murgatroyd had met his death ; they never guessed that she had gone in at the untoward moment, that she had surprised Laurence in his burglarious work, that she had replaced the scattered papers, locked the safe, and had sufficient presence of mind, even in the midst of bewilderment and surprise at discovering that her patient was dead, to slip the bunch of keys into the pocket of his dressing-gown. What a mercy that she was fairly strong-nerved—that she did not lose her head in moments of emergency ! Nay, it was more than a mercy ; it meant salvation to Laurence Murgatroyd.

It seemed as if that long day would never drag its hideous length away. In her life at Hollow Cottage she had been accustomed to spending long, long days entirely alone, save for the company of her old servant ; yet even at such times, when Laurence had been on duty and unable to get away

from barracks at all, she had never known a few hours which dragged along so slowly as the hours did on the day after Mr. Murgatroyd's death. It was no dulness which made them drag so heavily along; oh, no: it was something far worse; it partook of dread, of dread when her eyes should meet his, dread of the inevitable explanation between them, dread of that afterwards, when the disclosure of their marriage must be made, when they must live out their lives as man and wife with ever this hideous sordid secret between them.

She sat down and looked at her lunch, and, although William delicately pressed her with each of the several little dishes of which it consisted, she ate nothing. Then, wrapping her shawl around her, she went out into the conservatories, and, with the help of the head gardener, gathered an armful of the purest and daintiest blossoms, with which to deck the dead. That done, she went back to the little room again and to the fireside, and began to think once more, to think it all over with weary, weary reiteration to think that her Laurence was something—something she had not known, something strange, something guilty, something criminal;

and he was coming home, on his way now, to simulate distress, filial grief, to take up the responsibilities of the new life which lay before him!

"I brought the tea a little earlier, nurse," said William, appearing through the gloom. "You had such a poor lunch, I thought you would be glad of tea in good time. Now, do try to eat; do, nurse. There is a bit of extra special toast made on purpose for you, and I've had a telegram from Mr. Laurence to say that he'll be here by the train that gets to Burghley at ten minutes past five. The carriage is going off for him in half an hour: wouldn't you like to go, just for the drive, to get a breath of air, and get out of the house a little? Mr. Laurence is sure to be eager for the news. Wouldn't you like to go?"

"Not for the world," she replied. "It's very kind of you to think of it, William, but I'm not in the mood to-night for going anywhere. I'm tired out. I'd rather sit by the fire and wait."

Wait for what? Wait for the awful meeting which must come sooner or later between them. She shrank from the idea of a three miles' drive in a close carriage with her husband, as if she were a

criminal and he her accuser. Women are like that—some of them. So she sat on, sat by the fire alone.

CHAPTER XV.

AN INTERVAL.

AT last the sound of wheels was heard coming rapidly along the avenue. Nurse Marion, sitting intently listening in the little breakfast-room, which she had not left all day, rose to her feet and stood clutching hard at the mantel-shelf. She meant to go out into the hall to receive the dead man's son, but at the last moment her nerve failed her, and she stood there, holding on for support to the object that was nearest to her. The wheels stopped; the horses' feet came to a stand-still; the listening ears caught the sound of the opening door and Laurence Murgatroyd's voice.

"Where is she?" she heard him say. And, although she could not catch William's reply, she knew that he was telling his master where she was.

The next moment the door opened and Laurence came in, with his face blanched, his whole air

dejected, and yet with a light in his eyes which there was no mistaking. He came forward with both his hands outstretched.

"I got the telegram," he said. "I came as soon as I could. What am I to say to you—how am I to thank you for all that you have done for him, my poor old dad, whom I left almost in anger? Marion, I want you to take me to see him."

She shrank back. "Oh, no, no, not I. William, Mrs. Mackay, any one, but not I. I cannot go."

"But surely, of all, you are the one who has most right to go there with me," he said, gently.

She looked up at him in amazement.

He had closed the door behind him; he was still holding her hands; he had, apparently, not thought of kissing her. "Who has so much right as you," he said, "you, who did everything for him? Come, I should like to go at once."

"Then go; but I cannot go with you. It is impossible. I will not, dare not."

"Why, my dearest, what do you mean?"

"Oh, Laurence, you know."

"You mean, dearest, that in a measure we have deceived him; but I don't think that we need

trouble about it now. He is gone where these feelings have no place. He did not actually know what we had done, but I think he understands now."

"It is not that," she said.

"Then what?"

"Oh, Laurence, you know. You know without my telling you. I cannot go into that room with you. Go alone; or some one will take you."

He shrugged his shoulders and dropped her hand. "As you will," he said. "And when I come down again, you will tell me all about it."

But when Laurence Murgatroyd came down from his visit to his dead father's room, Nurse Marion had disappeared.

"Where is Nurse Marion?" he said to William.

"She have gone up-stairs, up to her room, Mr. Laurence," was William's reply. "She will dine with you to-night, Mr. Laurence?"

"Certainly."

"She'll eat nothing," said William, confidentially. "I never see any one so terrible cut up in my life. It was terrible, sir—terrible! You see, Mr. Laurence," he continued, as he leaned one hand upon the back of a chair, "nurse had gone into

Burghley for a bit of an airing, and master was better, very much better, and glad that she should have the chance of a bit of a change. Why, it was only yesterday morning—yesterday, Mr. Laurence—that he says to me, he says, ‘Yon little lass,’ he says, ‘is one in a thousand, and I want you to go into Burghley for me to-morrow and buy her something pretty for Christmas.’ And you see, Mr. Laurence, the poor master going like that, all in a minute like, when there was nobody by, seemed to upset her terrible. Now, them old women nurses what we used to have, nothing ever upsets them. Their appetites is always good, and their drinketites better. But with these lady nurses things are different. They’re pitiful, and they’re feeling. They get fond of their patients, and their patients get fond of them. And, oh, dear, Mr. Laurence, she did take on terrible last night—terrible!”

“Of course it must have been a dreadful shock to her,” said Laurence Murgatroyd, heaving a sigh, if the truth be told, that he could not go boldly up to Nurse Marion’s room and try to comfort her. “And of course, William, it’s a great satisfaction to me to know that my father liked and appreciated

her; because, you see, I was responsible for bringing her into the house."

"The master certainly did like her, Mr. Laurence," said William, in his most confidential tones; "he couldn't abear her out of sight. Mrs. Mackay, good, decent body as she is, always seemed to upset him, like. He put up with her, and that was about all you can say. And Nurse Marion she went to bed later and later every day that passed over her head, and if it hadn't been that I thought of suggesting that she should use the carriage of an afternoon I don't believe she'd ever have got out at all. She's a decent body, is Mrs. Mackay, I have no word to say against her, Mr. Laurence, but she's heavy-handed, and she's heavy-footed, and she breathes hard, and if she sets a bottle down she sets it down with a bang. She doesn't mean to—oh, a well-meaning woman as ever stepped—but that indelicate, no daintiness about her ways, everything done with a puff and a snort. And when a poor gentleman is so ill as the master was, it's no wonder he couldn't abear to have her about him."

It was not until the housemaid who waited upon her brought hot water and told her that it was time

to prepare for dinner that Marion decided that she would risk going down to share that meal with Laurence. Then caution came to her aid, and bade her, whatever it cost her, to do as she would do in ordinary every-day circumstances.

They naturally did not talk very much as long as William was in the room. Laurence Murgatroyd was subdued and quiet; the girl in her white nurse's cap opposite to him was as pale as a sheet and evidently worn out. It was not, indeed, before the door had closed behind the sympathetic William that Laurence addressed anything more than the most trivial remark to his wife.

"How unkind of you, dearest," he said, "not to stay with me!"

"Not at all," she replied: "I think it would have been very remarkable if I had stayed. I suppose you want to keep up appearances to the world until I can get away? I can't go until the funeral is over."

"And then——? Then you will go to Hollow Cottage, and I will follow you the next day. After that, as soon as we like we can begin our new life together. I shall have nothing to do here, for, from what you tell me of my poor old dad's last will,

everything will be held in abeyance for a couple of years."

She looked at him in open-eyed amazement. Was it possible that he meant to brazen out the position to her—she who had found him at the open door of his father's safe absolutely turning over papers to which he had no right of access? Was he going to pretend to her that he had had no part in the disappearance of that will? Oh, it was clever, perhaps it was worldly-wise, but it was audacity itself! Well, if that was his *rôle* she would fall into it for the present. If he said nothing, she would say nothing. If he kept silence, she too would not speak. That was a game that two could play at, and, for the present, she would show that she was as proficient as he.

"We can discuss that later," she said, very quietly, as she rose from the table. "For the present, Laurence, you will excuse me, perhaps if I go to bed. I am very tired: I did not sleep last night. It is not necessary to decide anything at present, and I am a good deal overdone."

He had risen too, and he took her hand and drew her nearer to him. "Do you know," he said,

looking at her very tenderly, "that you have not yet given me one single word of welcome? You have not kissed me."

Her eyes fell before his; her cheeks burned with a sense of her own guilty secret.

"I have not felt like welcome and merrymaking," she said, in an ominously quiet voice. "Yesterday was enough to take the heart out of a stronger woman than I am. I felt, when I went to bed last night, as if I should never be able to close my eyes again. I dare say you can't understand me, but it is true all the same."

"You are thoroughly overdone," said Murgatroyd.

"No, not overdone," she replied; "it is scarcely the right word for your purpose. I am heart-sick, Laurence; I am unhappy and wretched. I shall never be bright and gay and happy again. Cannot you understand, when I went into that room and found all my illusions shattered at one blow, that I realized what a mistake I had made in marrying, when I understood that it was too late to undo the past—the past that I would give worlds to alter? Can't you understand that all the life and heart went out of me?"

"No," he said, blankly, "I cannot. I think, my darling, that you are taking altogether too exaggerated a view of the case. Of course I know that you had set your heart upon getting round my poor father, but I think you may reasonably console yourself with the feeling—with, indeed, the certainty—that if you had been given a little longer time you would most assuredly have accomplished your object."

She looked at him for a moment in greater amazement than ever. "Then why," she said, blankly, speaking as if the words were wrung from her, "why, Laurence, why did you not give me that time? Why were you in such a hurry?"

If her tones were the tones of one wrung with agony, his face was absolutely blank as he looked at her. "Upon my soul," he said, "I don't understand you. Give you more time! Why, what do you mean? It is no use going back now and wishing that we had waited to be married. You were not unwilling. I—I—I don't understand you."

She looked at him reproachfully. "Oh, Laurence," she said, in a pained voice, scarcely above a whisper, "if you are going to take that

tone, it is no use our talking any longer! I will leave you." And before he could stop her she had slipped out of the room.

He sat down by the table again with a very blank face.

"Well," he ejaculated, aloud, "it is quite true, one can never tell how a woman will take things."

CHAPTER XVI.

A JOURNEY ALONE.

THE next few days were singularly uncomfortable ones to Laurence Murgatroyd. To those who are left behind there is always a great sense of unrest, especially when the one who is gone is the head of the house. There was much to be seen to which could be done only by Laurence Murgatroyd himself. For instance, the day after his arrival he was visited both by the doctor and by Mr. Blenkinsop.

"I don't know whether you are aware," the lawyer said, "that your father made a new will?"

"Yes, I was aware of it," answered Laurence, though he did not think it necessary to add how he had been made acquainted with the circumstance.

"It was not a just will, and I did my best to persuade him against it. However, he insisted upon it, and I made it, and it was signed. Its principal provision was that, unless you were married within two years of his death to a lady with not less than twenty thousand pounds to her fortune, the whole of his property, with the exception of certain legacies, including a provision for your brother Geoffrey, was to be divided between the County Hospital and the Asylum for Imbeciles at Burghley."

"Well?" said Laurence, in a questioning tone.

"Well, that will has disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes. I put it away in the safe in your father's dressing-room, and gave him the keys. I naturally went there to look for it when I came over after his death, but it was nowhere to be found. Nurse Marion tells me that he twice had it out to look at it, when she both gave it to him and put it back in its place. The old woman who relieved Nurse Marion also fetched it for him on several occasions; but she also believes that each time she put it back again. She was not with him at the time of his

death. Nurse Marion was out—had gone for a drive for the sake of the air—and your father, being on his bedroom sofa, and decidedly better, sent Mrs.—let me see, what was her name? Oh, Mackay—yes, he sent Mrs. Mackay to get her tea in the servants' hall. William went up to look at him twice, and both times found him asleep, but when Nurse Marion came in she discovered that he was dead."

"What has this to do with the will?" asked Laurence.

"Well, it is my belief," said Mr. Blenkinsop, "that your father on that occasion got the will out himself, and that he destroyed it. No one else saw him or had access to his room; nobody was interested in its disappearance, excepting yourself. You, of course, being a seven hours' journey away and easily traceable, are out of the question. At all events, the will has gone, and I believe that he destroyed it. I hope he destroyed it. It was not a just will; it was one which it gave me great pain to make, and more pain to see signed. Our dear old friend was in a measure the victim of his own integrity of character. Sometimes, you know, my dear Laurence, it is almost the curse of a man to

know that his word is his bond, for he does not always like to break it, even when he knows that it would be more just to do so. Your poor father, my dear old friend and client, had that feeling to an abnormal degree—the feeling that his word was his bond; but I feel very, very glad to think that he was strong enough in view of his approaching end to do what was right and just both to you and to himself.”

“Then how will his property go now?” asked Laurence.

“As to that, it is very simply explained. The previous will which your father made left the bulk of his property to you. There is an annuity to your brother Geoffrey, and various legacies to different servants and employees.”

“Is that will in existence?” Laurence asked.

“I have it in my hands. When your father made his last will, he bade me take the old one—or I should say the previous one—away for safe keeping, a circumstance which in itself seems to bear out the truth of what I believe, that he was not very keenly set upon his last testament.”

“Then the heir to the property is——?”

"Yourself," finished the lawyer. "And I must congratulate you that everything has turned out so thoroughly as it ought to have done."

When Mr. Blenkinsop had gone Laurence Murgatroyd rang the bell.

"William, send up and ask Nurse Marion if she will come down here for a few minutes. I wish to speak to her."

"Yes, sir," replied William.

In a few minutes Marion came into the room.

"You sent for me," she said, quietly.

"Shut the door," he answered. "My dear, I have great news for you," he said, drawing her to the fireplace and standing with his arm around her. "What do you think old Blenkinsop has just told me? That the dear old dad burned that will after all, and the one which will stand is the one leaving everything practically to me. So," in a triumphant tone, "there will be no waiting, no dodging, no disagreeables of any kind. There! What do you think of that?"

"I knew that the will was gone, Laurence," she said, looking up at him, "and I knew that Mr. Blenkinsop believed that your father burned it."

"You knew? When? Last night, when I came home?"

"Yes."

"And you never told me? Why, my darling, what has come to you? It is extraordinary that you should keep such a piece of news from me, and without any reason whatever."

"I did not intend to keep it from you," she said, wearily. "What was the good of my telling you as a piece of news something which you knew already?"

"But I didn't know."

"Did you not?"

She shut her eyes as he stood there with his arm around her. So he was going to keep the farce up to the very end? She felt like a woman in a maze, as if her head was going. Surely she had not dreamed that she saw Laurence standing at the door of the safe in the dressing-room, a light in his hand and turning over the papers on the shelf? No, she had but just come into the house; she was wide awake; she had never been more wide awake in all her life. Then the light had gone out, she had felt herself thrust on one side, and afterwards had discovered that which was evidence enough to

prove that it had been no dream, that she had indeed been very wide awake.

"Of course," he went on, mistaking the cause of her silence, "this new state of affairs will make all the difference to us. Dearest, your troubles are all over now; there will be no more Hollow Cottage, no more poverty, no more parting and dodging, and all the horrible subterfuge that has gone on since you gave yourself to me. I don't see why I shouldn't tell them at once what your real position is."

"No," she said, suddenly, speaking with the strongest emphasis, "no, Laurence, that I absolutely and entirely forbid. When the funeral is over I shall leave Murgatroyd Park and go back to Hollow Cottage. No, don't say a word; I insist upon having my own way. I want to be quiet for a little time; I want to get over the horror of what I have gone through."

"And I want my wife," he said, in a very tender tone.

"Then," she said, "you must wait for her. I would prefer that they believed we were married after all was over. They can put it down to gratitude, if they like," she said, with a harsh, discordant laugh. "Such things have been done before, I believe."

He looked at her doubtfully. "I don't know what has come over you," he said, at last. "One would think that you were sorry that I had come into my father's property, that you liked me better when I was poor and could not do more for you than I would have done if you had been my mistress instead of my wife. I don't understand you; I confess that I don't understand you."

"Women are difficult to understand," she answered. "I did like you better when you were poor—when you were all my own. I was happy then."

"But you will be happy now, when you have got over this."

"I shall never get over it," she said, bitterly. "I shall never be really happy again. I would give ten years of my life to go back to those happy days when you came now and then and everything was bright and fresh and honest with us. I shall never feel quite honest again."

"My dear, you take too exaggerated a view of the whole situation," he said, trying hard to make his tones patient.

"Perhaps I do. Let me alone, Laurie; don't worry me any more while I am here; be my

employ^{er's} son ; let me remain your father's nurse. Then, when my last duty is over, I will go home and try to pull myself together again."

So during the two days which followed they had no more interviews of this kind. She joined him at lunch and dinner, and during the rest of the day she kept as much as possible out of his way.

Then the day of the funeral came. There was much coming to and fro, the arrival of many carriages, the scent of many flowers. There was singularly little grief. Laurence Murgatroyd's face was drawn and white, and the general verdict was that he was terribly cut up by his father's death. Of real mourners, however, Laurence was the only one, for the late John Murgatroyd had not been blessed with many relations, and those whom Providence had given him he had not assiduously cultivated. There were two distant cousins of his late wife's, to each of whom he had left a trifling legacy, but there was no train of grief-stricken women, and the only manifest sorrow during that sad ceremony was from the son who was the heir to everything and the nurse who had attended him during the past few weeks.

There were the customary baked meats/on their return to the house after the ceremony, a dismal feast, at which Laurence Murgatroyd presided, and at which, naturally enough, Marion was not present. The company was solemnly decorous, and the talk ran mostly on agricultural subjects. Then one by one they filed away, and Laurence Murgatroyd, the two cousins, the rector, the doctor, and a few others interested in the will, passed into the library to hear the final disposition of John Murgatroyd's worldly belongings.

Nobody had anything to say. It was a natural thing that Laurence Murgatroyd, being the elder son, and having been most with his father, should inherit the major part of the property. Those who knew anything about Geoffrey shook their heads and looked wise when they realized how completely the dead man had clipped his wings.

"Very wise," said the rector to his nearest neighbour. "Geoffrey was always a sad scamp. It would have been quite within the bounds of possibility for our poor friend to have made him the heir. He was set upon Laurence marrying money, and it was indeed the grief of the later years of his

life that he could not persuade him to do so. I am sure it is a most merciful thing that everything is comfortably arranged and disposed of."

The general verdict about Laurence Murgatroyd was one of satisfaction that his father had left him the bulk of his property.

"Oh, yes," said one to the other, "there is another son—a younger son—a sad scamp, I believe. So sensible of John Murgatroyd to leave him enough to keep him out of the workhouse and to be paid in that way. Very, very sensible. Of course a hard-headed man like that, who has made his own fortune, generally does sensible things. Oh, yes, Laurence was always a great comfort to him. I'm sure it's to be hoped that he will leave the army and settle down at the Park; he will be a great acquisition to the county."

"Especially if he marries one of the county's daughters, eh?" said one facetious listener.

"The owner of Murgatroyd Park will marry as a matter of course," was the withering response.

Immediately after the reading of the will William took an opportunity of whispering to his master that Nurse Marion was leaving by the five-thirty train.

"She mustn't go without my seeing her," said Laurence Murgatroyd, hastily. "Ask her to come to me in the library."

"You will go straight back to Hollow Cottage?" he said to her, when they were alone together.

"I am going to London to-night, Laurence," she said. "I cannot possibly get down to Blankshire to-night."

"No, no, dearest, certainly not; to-morrow you will go down there. To-night you had better sleep at the 'Burlington'; you will find it very comfortable and absolutely all right."

"Is it not a little fashionable for me?"

"Not at all."

"I have only my uniform clothes with me. Don't you think I had better go to one of the railway hotels?"

"No; I think you will find the 'Burlington' the most comfortable. Why can't you change your things in the train? You could get a carriage to yourself."

"Because I have brought nothing else."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. There's no harm in your nurse's uniform. You had much better go to an hotel which I know; I should much prefer it.

And I shall leave this to-morrow, or next day at the very latest, and shall go straight home to Hollow Cottage."

"Very well. By the bye, you haven't paid me my wages," she said.

He laughed aloud and pulled out his pocket-book. "Will fifty pounds do you?"

"Oh, I don't want so much."

"Well, you had much better take it. One never knows when the necessity for money may arise; it won't hurt you to have it with you."

So she took the money and bade him good-bye.

"Kiss me," he said, imperatively.

She turned her face on one side. "I would rather not here; it is not safe."

"Nonsense! Kiss me at once," he exclaimed, with imperative affection.

She looked at him doubtfully for a moment, then with a choking sob she flung her arms round his neck and strained him to her. "Good-bye, my Laurence, good-bye," she said. "I am very, very unhappy; try to think kindly of me."

"One would think," said he, looking fondly down upon her, "that we were parting for ever. But,

dearest, think, this is the last time that you shall go away by yourself. God bless you, my wife, my sweet-heart! I shall count the hours until I see you again."

He let her go with a pang. It was all wrong that she, the real mistress of the house, should go out in such guise, unattended, to face a dark journey alone. However, he consoled himself by the remembrance that it was for the last time, and set to work with a will so to arrange matters that he could leave Murgatroyd Park at the earliest possible moment to join his wife at Hollow Cottage.

It was, however, on the evening of the third day that he walked through the winter darkness along the deserted road to the little cottage which they called home. No lights were burning, save one at the side of the house. Laurence Murgatroyd rang the bell and thumped hard upon the panels of the door, and after a minute or so Simmons came hastily out and flung open the door with a surprised "Dear me, is it you, sir!"

"Yes, it is I. I'm cold and tired, Simmons. How are, you? I suppose I needn't ask if your mistress is in?"

Simmons fell back a step or so. "Lor', sir," she said, "the missis ain't here. Missis haven't been back since the night you first telegraphed for her."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE EMPTY SHELL.

WHEN the old servant asserted in simple accents of whose truth there was no doubt that her mistress had not been at Hollow Cottage since she had left it in reply to a summons by telegraph, Laurence Murgatroyd staggered into the house with a dreadful sense upon him that some awful catastrophe had happened.

"Not here!" he exclaimed, incredulously.

"No, sir; and I've never set eyes on her since she got your telegram nearly three months ago."

"But, my good woman, I parted from your mistress only three days ago. She was coming straight home. I had business, and promised to follow her yesterday or to-day."

"Was that in London, sir?" Simmons inquired.

"No, not in London; in Westshire. She had been down to nurse my father. She was coming here by way of London."

"Dear, dear," said Simmons, then added a polite remark to the effect that she hoped the old gentleman was better.

"Yes, yes," said Laurence, impatiently, "yes, he's better—at least, I mean, he's dead. My wife remained until the funeral was over. Something must have happened to her in London. I must go back at once."

"You'll let me toss up a bit of dinner for you, sir, before you go," cried Simmons, aghast. "I have a bit of beef-steak in the house that I intended for my own dinner to-morrow and I could make you an omelette."

"No, no," he cried impatiently; "I cannot waste time here. I must get on."

"Are you going to London, sir?"

"Yes; I must get up without delay."

"You can't get up till there's a train, you know, sir," said she, sensibly. "The mail at nine o'clock would stop for you if you ran back to the station now and sent a message."

"Is that so?"

"Certainly it is. If you run back now and catch the station-master, I will have your dinner nearly ready by the time you are home again. Now do, sir. There never was any good yet in doing things in a hurry,

You can't catch a train before the mail, not if it was ever so; you couldn't even get a special put on. So come back and get your dinner comfortably. It's not such a dinner as missis always had for you, but it's the best I can do on the spur of the moment."

Thus adjured, Murgatroyd took his way back along the darksome road. His brain was on fire, his head in a whirl; yet his faith and trust in Marion never wavered for a moment. Some accident had happened to her in London; either she had slipped in crossing the road, or she had fallen down some steps, or been taken suddenly ill on her journey. He would find her at some hospital; of that there could be no doubt. Of course he had had a shock, almost a fright, at finding that she was not at Hollow Cottage. His first impulse had been to run out again into the dark night and attempt to find her; but the old woman, who was a shrewd old thing and kindly, had known better than he had done. Her advice had been good, and he was glad that he had been sufficiently calm and collected to follow it.

The station-master was just leaving the office for his house when Laurence Murgatroyd walked in.

"Is it true, station-master," he said, "that you can stop the mail—the London mail—by wire?"

"Oh, yes, certainly, sir. Do you wish to go to London by the mail?"

"I do, on most urgent business."

"She passes at nine-fifteen. You will make sure to be in time, for we are barely allowed a minute for getting in any passenger that we have."

"I will be here at nine o'clock sharp," said Murgatroyd.

"Will you have any luggage?" the station-master asked.

"Nothing more than this portmanteau. That can be very easily disposed of."

"Very good, sir. I will send the wire off at once."

Laurence Murgatroyd slipped something yellow and shining into the station-master's hand. Being an official of considerable importance, he demurred a moment at taking it, but Laurence turned to him and said, "Pray oblige me by accepting it. You don't know what it will be to me to get to London by that train. Thank you very much. I will be here at nine sharp."

Then he went off down the dark road again, and in due course reached Hollow Cottage.

It presented this time a very different appearance. Lights streamed from the dining-room windows, and a fire was cheerfully blazing in the grate. The cloth was laid for dinner, and Laurence could smell that it was in course of preparation. Simmons did not keep him waiting long. She apologized for the smallness of the steak.

"You see, sir," she said, "a steak for three is one thing, and a steak for a lonely body like me is another. But it's tender, and that's what everybody couldn't say of their steaks."

"Oh, no, it smells delicious; and I am frightfully hungry, Simmons," Murgatroyd replied.

"I had a few cold potatoes by me," she explained, lifting the cover off a savory-smelling dish, "and I fried them up. Really, it is scrapped up out of odds and ends, but I hope you'll be able to get a meal off it."

"Oh, it's a dinner fit for a king!" he cried.

He was quite cheerful at the prospect of going back to London to find his wife. That was characteristic of Laurence Murgatroyd's nature; he was

happy-go-lucky to the last degree. What he wished to believe he did believe, and he never accepted failure until failure was so positive that only an imbecile could have had doubt about it. He enjoyed his dinner thoroughly, voted the bit of beefsteak perfection and the fried potatoes a dream, ate the whole of the omelette, and sat down by the fire with a pipe afterwards in as well-satisfied a frame of mind as any man could desire.

It never occurred to him until he was actually in the train for London that if an accident had happened to his wife she would certainly have contrived to let him know sooner than this. If she had been knocked down by a cab, or had fallen, or, had otherwise sustained injury, surely, immediately coming back to her senses, she would have asked the hospital people to let him know without the delay of an hour.

It is a long journey from Blankshire to London, and Laurence Murgatroyd had ample time for reflection before he reached the great metropolis. By the time he got to King's Cross he was torn between two opinions: first, that she might have been very seriously injured and was lying unconscious in some hospital; secondly, that, for some undefined

reason, she was purposely hiding herself from him. Truth to tell, he was more than half inclined to accept the latter of the two opinions as the right solution of the mystery; for it came back to him that during the last few days at Murgatroyd Park Marion had been more than strange in her manner towards him. It would be natural that as a nurse she should be not a little upset at the sudden death of her patient, especially remembering that he had died in her absence and that death might not have occurred at all had she not left the house; but that was no reason why she should so thoroughly take to heart the situation between them. For instance, she had spoken more than once as if something had happened which was unforgivable. Of course they had deceived the old gentleman; but then he had been unreasonable in his paternal demands, and Laurence felt that he had been in most ways so good a son that he need not now permit his conscience to trouble him on the score of having pleased himself in the matter of his marriage. Of course, if Marion had made up her mind that she would set that as a barrier between them, they had not much chance of happiness for

the future. She had said to him over and over again, "Oh, you know what I mean!" She had something on her mind—there was no doubt about that—something hypersensitive, something distinctly exaggerated, something which would not, in the light of ordinary common sense, hold water. Was it possible that the foolish child meant to go back to her nursing, to the valiant task of earning her own living? He had heard of wives doing such things; at least he had read of it in novels. It seemed preposterous and absurd that his wife could want to do anything of that kind, or think of doing it; but then it was equally absurd, or if not actually absurd it was equally pitiful, that Marion should so bitterly reproach herself for such a trivial matter as having married him without his father's consent.

It was close upon one o'clock when he arrived at King's Cross. He knew that it was no use attempting anything like a search that night, so he went straight into the hotel and got to bed at once. He slept like the proverbial top, and by nine o'clock in the morning was up and dressed and impatiently awaiting his breakfast.

Even then he had not made up his mind as to the

best course that he could take ; and while he ate his fried fish and his bacon and eggs with the help of a friendly newspaper, he went over and over the whole circumstances of the situation and tried to judge best which of the courses that were open to him he ought to take.

He might take a cab and go round all the London hospitals ; but, then, should he ask for Mrs. Murgatroyd, or for Mrs. West, or for Nurse Marion ? He could not possibly go and ask for one after another : that would not do. Should he go to Paddington Station and try to find out whether anyone remembered the arrival of a nurse in gray uniform by the nine o'clock train on the 14th instant ? It was then the 18th of the month—the 18th of December. The stations were already beginning to show signs of Christmas traffic : he could hardly hope that any porter would have noticed her unless some very unusual circumstance had drawn his attention towards her. Of course there might be a letter or a telegram awaiting him at Murgatroyd Park ; he had left home very early the previous morning, before the arrival of the post, not expecting to receive any letter from Marion. It would be easy to send a

wire there and find out whether any particular communication was awaiting him.

He beckoned to a waiter, and asked him to bring him a telegraph form. Without hesitation he addressed the message to William, the butler. "If any wire is awaiting me, send message on to my club without delay; also any letters."

He felt easier when that was done. At all events, he had done something. Then he finished his breakfast and concluded that he would take a cab down to Pall Mall and await the coming of William's reply. And then, when he was going up the steps of the palatial mansion which gave him a London address, he remembered that Murgatroyd Park was three and a half miles from Burghley. Three and a half miles with a hired conveyance—the kind of conveyance the post-office people would be likely to get—did not mean receiving an answer within half an hour. The time was going by and he was doing nothing, and all the while Marion might be in extremity. "By Jove," his thoughts ran, "I have a good mind to go to a private detective fellow. They're accustomed to ferreting things out; I am not."

He turned into the nearest room and took up the first paper that came to hand. "Mr. Searchem, Private Inquiry Agent, Pump Chambers." That sounded likely; possibly Mr. Searchem might help him.

So Murgatroyd went down the great stone steps again and got into a passing cab. "Pump Chambers, Cistern Court; somewhere off the Strand," was his order.

"Right you are, sir," responded the Jehu of the lon gondola, cheerfully.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RENUNCIATION.

LAURENCE MURGATROYD found that Mr. Searchem was at his office and disengaged, and he was forthwith shown up into his private room. He was a flabby-looking person, with a fatherly manner, and when he heard what Murgatroyd desired of him, he gave him every hope that the matter would be speedily and easily arranged.

"It is most extraordinary," said he, "how accidents and misconceptions do arise in London. There was a case the other day of a young lady who

came to London on her honeymoon. Her husband had to go out on business, and she forgot the name of the hotel at which they were staying—possibly she had never known it; at all events she went out and could not find her way back again. One would think that her simplest plan would have been to telegraph home, telling them to wire back what hotel she had written from. Possibly she did not like to do this; anyway, she wandered about the streets hour after hour, not daring to ask her way, not, indeed, knowing what way to ask. She had not much money with her, and at last she fell asleep upon a bench in the Bayswater Road. There a policeman found her, and to him she confided her story. He took her to the station, and the next morning she was restored to her husband, who had been wandering about half the night in search of her, imagining that she had committed suicide or run away with somebody else, or something of the kind."

"I am quite sure that my wife has not run away with anybody else," said Murgatroyd, with a confident laugh. "I think it most probable that she has met with an accident and is lying in some London hospital."

"You were on good terms when you parted from her?"

"My dear sir," said Murgatroyd, "I have never been on anything but good terms with my wife."

"That is good hearing," said the private detective, brightly. He had his own theory on the subject, and his theory was certainly not that Mrs. Murgatroyd had met with an accident. "If your wife had met with an accident and had recovered her senses, she would have communicated with you."

"Yes, that is so. I have wired to my man-servant to find out whether there were any letters or message at home for me, bidding him send on letters or wire to me at once."

"You have had no reply?"

"I could not have a reply. My place is several miles from a telegraph office. I must give them time to get the telegram to the house and back again."

"And you would be addressed——?"

"At my club."

"If you have any letter or wire you will let me know at once?"

"Certainly."

"Well, my dear sir, I don't think that I can help

you further at this moment. I will take steps to have all the police stations and hospitals searched. What was your wife wearing ? ”

“ Oh ”—and then Laurence Murgatroyd stopped short and looked at his interlocutor—“ oh, well, the fact is, she was wearing a grey dress and cloak, and a bonnet with a grey veil,” he went on, rather lamely.

“ Grey dress—grey cloak—bonnet with a grey veil,” repeated Mr. Searchem, then looked at Murgatroyd with a bland expression. “ That sounds like a nurse’s dress.”

“ My wife was in nurse’s dress. Look here ; I’ll tell you all about it. My father was a very rich man, and several years ago he made up his mind that I must marry a woman with money. I met my wife—at least my wife nursed me through a bad hunting accident, and, as I knew that it was perfectly hopeless to appeal to my father, I married her quietly. Well—er—I was staying with my father a few weeks ago, and he was taken ill. I couldn’t get a nurse anywhere—you know the dearth there has been—and I wired to my wife to come as his nurse——”

“ Oh, I see. And she did ? ”

"Yes, she came."

"And was she successful?"

"Not at first—no. Then my father seemed to take to her. She was a perfect angel of patience——"

"Of course," murmured Mr. Searchem.

"And he was very difficult to do for.* And at last he got so that he would hardly have anybody else about him. But still we felt that it would never do to make him cognizant of our actual relations; in fact, he almost quarrelled with me because I would not propose to a certain lady, and I went back to my regiment, leaving my wife in charge of the case. And my father eventually died."

"Did he die suddenly?"

"Well, yes; at least, it was almost sudden, but he was so very ill that it was little more than a question of time, according to his doctor. He had made a point of my wife's taking a drive every afternoon, and the under-keeper's mother, a very respectable person, sat with him while she was gone. She always stayed with him while my wife got her proper sleep—or, I should more truly say, some sleep—and that afternoon when she came in she found that he had sent the woman down to have tea

in hall. And when she came to look closer, she found that my father was dead."

"I see. And you have come in for the property?"

"I have come in for the bulk of the property. I am the elder son."

"Then your wife left Murgatroyd Park before you?"

"Yes; I wished to join her at home and to bring her back as my wife. I didn't see the necessity of servants and everybody knowing that she had been my wife all along."

"Naturally not, very naturally not," said the detective, reflectively. "Was your wife much upset?"

"Oh, frightfully so—frightfully upset," returned Laurence, unhesitatingly. "She reproached herself most bitterly that we had in a measure deceived the old man, and declared that she should never be happy again, and a good deal more to the same effect; of course, not as between her and me."

"Naturally not," returned Mr. Searchem. "Well, Mr. Murgatroyd, I will do the best I can. If your wife is in London, I will guarantee that we shall find her. Possibly you will have a letter or a telegram during the course of the day, such

as will set all your doubts and fears at rest. I hope so, I am sure; with all my heart I hope so. And be sure that you let me know if you do have any news. And if I want you, where shall I find you?"

"At the Army and Navy Club."

• Mr. Searchem deliberately wrote down the address. "Well, remember that in affairs of this kind moments are worth their weight in gold, if I may use that expression, and I will trust you not to leave your club too long unvisited, so that any information may reach me as soon as possible. Good-morning, good-morning."

When Laurence Murgatroyd got back to his club, he found a telegram awaiting him from William at Murgatroyd Park. It ran as follows: "No wire received. Several letters forwarded. Mr. Geoffrey just arrived."

By that time it was approaching the luncheon-hour, and Laurence Murgatroyd, having put the telegram into an envelope, sent it off by special messenger to Mr. Searchem in Pump Court. Then he ordered his luncheon and set himself to await the arrival of the country post.

Evidently William must have sent the letters to

be posted in Burghley at the same time as the telegram had been returned from Murgatroyd Park, for between four and five o'clock he turned listlessly into the club again and found that some letters had just arrived. There were half a dozen or so of unpromising-looking envelopes, and one in a square plain envelope, which he seized with a great throb at his heart, for the handwriting upon it was Marion's.

In order to read the letters better he had turned into the smoking-room, and he sank into the first easy-chair that he saw. Then he took out a closely written sheet and began to read. It began, "My dear Laurence," a circumstance which in itself was sufficient to make him catch his breath and sit up straight in the great lounging-chair, as if he had come face to face with a situation of great gravity and danger.

"MY DEAR LAURENCE," it said,—

"I feel that an apology is due to you for having left Murgatroyd Park without telling you what my plans were for the future, for letting you think that I intended to return to Hollow Cottage and wait there till you should join me. My dear

Laurence, for you and me there can be no future, no meeting, no anything but separation and, if possible, forgetfulness. I tried so hard to tell you all that was in my mind before I left your father's house. You would not understand me, although my meaning must have been as clear to you as it was to me. Why, why did you pretend, when I told you that I could never be happy again, that you did not know what I meant? Laurence, when you came to Murgatroyd Park, taking advantage of my absence as you did, you as surely killed your father as if you had given him poison or struck him his death-blow. When you blew the light out and thrust me on one side, did you for one moment believe that I did not recognize you? Surely that is incredible. You put out the light of my life when you put out that tell-tale candle. When you thrust me on one side, you thrust me out of your heart for ever. I will not reproach you, for I know that you had my welfare at heart as much as your own, but you must see how impossible it is for us to think of living together with such a secret between us. So I am going away right out of your life, where you will never see or hear of me again. Pray

do not look for me or in any way try to coax me back ; I could never, never come. I saved you by putting the keys back again, but it is the last service that I shall ever render you. My heart is full to breaking, my head on fire, my eyes burning as though they would never, never close again. Oh, Laurence, why, why did you do this hideous thing ? No money was worth it. I thought you cared for me for myself ; I find that you can only care for me second to your father's money. If ever a heart was broken, you have broken mine ! and not only my heart, Laurence, but my joy of life, my faith, all that went to make the sum of my earthly happiness. I am going to a life of hard work, of ceaseless toil, of utter and entire self-renunciation. I shall try, in the hard path of duty, to forget the dream that I once had of happiness that was too beautiful for this cruel and disappointing world. I have loved you heart and soul ; surely I have no need to prove it to you. By the memory of that love I entreat you to let me pass out of your life now, as if I had never been. Knowing what we do know, we could never, never be happy : so that our only chance of finding happiness is to put land and

sea between us, so that we may never meet again. I feel this is the only way by which one or both of us may find happiness, or, if not happiness, the peace of oblivion. Oh, Laurie, Laurie, why did you do it? why did you do it? I would have borne so much for you—poverty, privation, obscurity—everything except dishonour.

“Your wife,

“MARION.”

CHAPTER XIX.

REFLECTION.

WHEN Laurence Margatroyd came to the end of the letter, signed “Your wife, Marion,” the whole truth lay as clearly planned out before him as a printed page. Some one had been tampering with the dear old man’s safe, and Marion had, evidently, surprised him in the act. That someone *must*, of course, have been Geoffrey, who was supposed by them all to be safe in Australia. No wonder she had been deceived into believing that she had actually seen her husband, for the likeness to him and Geoffrey was quite marked enough, for anyone not knowing

both of them intimately, to take the one for the other. So this was the meaning of it all. This was why she had declared that she could never be happy again; this was the cause of her distress and of her wan looks!

It was characteristic of Murgatroyd that he was not in the least annoyed or angry. The first instinct of some men would have been one of pain or anger, that a wife could so mistake the nobility of her husband's character. Not so Murgatroyd. To him, her attitude towards him was, under such circumstances, absolutely natural, and one of his first thoughts was that her attitude was perfectly justifiable. The question was—where, and how soon he could find her?

He glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes past five. Well, he would run down to Pump Chambers and try to catch old Searchem before he shut up shop for the day. No sooner said than done. He went out of the club and hailed a cab, bidding the man drive like fury to the detective's office.

Fortunately, Mr. Searchem had not yet departed from his business quarters. "You have news, Mr. Murgatroyd?" he inquired, as Laurence went in.

"Well, yes, I have news, Mr. Searchem; that is to say, I have had a letter from my wife."

"And no accident has happened to her?"

"Nore."

"And she has gone home?"

"No; and the worst of it is, I don't know where she has gone."

"You had better show me the letter."

"I don't think I can do that," said Laurence.

Mr. Searchem sat back in his chair with a resigned air. "Oh, well, of course, if you are only going to tell your legal adviser half a story, it is useless to expect any great result out of our consultations."

"It's not that," said Laurence, stirring uneasily in his chair, "it's not that at all, but the letter deals with family matters, which I have no right to divulge. I will read you everything that she says about herself and her plans. With regard to me she is under an entire misapprehension. Her present intention is, poor child, to try to forget me in the hard path of duty. I had an idea that the duty of a wife was with her husband, but no doubt I was absolutely wrong. In any case my duty is to

find her with as little delay as possible. Where she is going, what she is going to do, I cannot imagine."

"Had she any money with her?"

"Oh, yes, she had money, but nothing in the way of capital."

"Had Mrs. Murgatroyd any relatives?"

"Well, yes, but I have never seen any of them or had any communication with any of them. You see, our marriage was a dead secret. She has a sister, I think, married to a clergyman, but upon my soul I can't give you the address, though I might find it among my wife's papers in Blankshire; she has another sister in Russia, but I can't give you her address either."

"Russia? Oh, she wouldn't go there."

"She has another sister in Australia."

"Australia! What does she do? What does the one in Russia do?"

"The one in Russia is governess to a Prince Somebody; the one in Australia is a nurse, and runs a nursing establishment of her own."

"That is where your wife has gone. Had she enough money?"

"I'm sure I don't know. What does the passage cost?"

"It would depend upon whether she went out first- or second-class or steerage, or whether she got a free passage out for her services on the journey; but that's where your wife has gone."

"By Jove, I shouldn't wonder!" ejaculated Murgatroyd. "And, by Jove, you know, when you come to think of it, that is shaking the dust of her connection off her feet in no half-hearted sort of way."

"And you seem to admire her the more for it," said the inquiry agent, in not a little amusement.

"Well, do you know, I think if I could explain the whole circumstances to you you would admire her as much as I do. She was perfectly right, knowing—or rather thinking—what she does, to go off and leave me. I admire her, by Jove, more than ever I did."

"You don't know, I suppose, what part of Australia Mrs. Murgatroyd's sister is in?"

"Oh, yes, I do: she's in Sydney."

"In Sydney. Oh, well, then, I think that narrows down our task into very small limits. I am very much obliged to you for letting me have the news so quickly. ~~Are you remaining in London?~~"

"Yes: I shall stay until I have some news of her."

"Well, then," said Mr. Searchem, "I will wire to you at your club if I have any need of you. You can do nothing more to-night. My men will go down and keep an eye on the boats; only, as I said before, don't stay too long at a time away from your club: I might want you at any moment."

Laurence Murgatroyd was not nearly so uneasy or unhappy as he drove back along the Strand; indeed, his mind was more full of admiration of Mr. Searchem than of anxiety about Marion. He was sorry, of course, that she had been upset and made unhappy on his account; but he knew that as soon as they met he could put all that right at once and for ever. Of course Searchem would set his myrmidons to work, and Marion, poor child, would be run to earth, or, more properly speaking, to water, just when she was flattering herself that her scheme for absconding was working perfectly. Then they would wire to him, and he would fly down and bring her safely back again, and try to make her forget that any trouble had ever parted them. Poor little woman, it was rough luck that

such a dreadful suspicion of him should have got into her mind right on the top of their wonderful good fortune! Of course she ought to have known him better than to think that he would go interfering with the dear old man's papers or try to tamper with his will in any way.

He lay back in the easy-running cab and gave himself up to a curious train of thought. How strange it was that he and Geoffrey should be so like and yet so unlike each other! What an unmitigated blackguard Geoffrey had always been! Laurence Murgatroyd believed confidently that if there were ninety-nine ways of doing the same thing right, and only one way of doing it wrong, his brother, Geoffrey would unerringly and without hesitation choose the wrong one out of the hundred. He had always been the same from his cradle upward—a bad hat, an ingrained blackguard, an unmitigated scoundrel. He had probably, having watched Marion out of the way, crept into the house, and had ransacked his father's private safe. Of course, he had been after their mother's diamonds, and would probably have secured them but for Marion's timely entrance. They, however, were safe enough.

Then a sudden thought occurred to him, such as made him sit bolt upright in the cab with a jerk which caused the horse to go skeltering on as if it had had a cut with the whip. What if his father's death had been, as Marion had suggested, due to the sudden appearance of his wastrel son upon the scene? For several years the dear old man had not spoken of Geoffrey except as an incubus for whose daily bread he must provide. He had never, since he packed him off to Australia, expressed the slightest desire to see him or to communicate with him. Murgatroyd well remembered the very last time that his father had spoken of Geoffrey to him. 'It was when Geoffrey had written home asking for an increase of his allowance of four hundred a year, and Laurence, after reading the letter, touched perhaps by some kindred feeling, had said to his father, "Well, sir, this business he speaks of might be the making of him; you are very rich; a hundred or two more or less is nothing to you; why don't you give him a little more?" He could see as if it had been yesterday the fury with which the old man had turned upon him. "Bad he is," he

thundered; "bad he was in the beginning, and bad he will be to the end. He is his mother's son; and it is for that reason alone that I have undertaken to do as much as I do for him. It's all very well for you, Laurie, to suggest giving in to his demands; you don't know the value of money; you've never had to make it: I have. I know a scoundrel, too, when I see one, and my vision isn't blinded because he happens to be my own flesh and blood, my own son. A man can't starve on four hundred a year; there's many a decent family bred and brought up on it. It is just four hundred a year too much to waste, and I feel in giving Geoffrey as much and in having willed him as much for the term of his natural life that I am taking four hundred golden pounds a year out of the hands of honest people. Don't speak of Geoffrey to me again. There's no sickly sentimentality about me, Laurie: I've done my duty by him, and when my duty is done that's everything."

So Geoffrey had broken bonds and come back again! And what if his coming had been his father's death-blow? What if there had been an altercation between them—a fight for those keys

which Marion spoke of as having put back again? Put back again! Did she mean into his father's pocket? What if there had been an altercation—a struggle? It made Murgatroyd's very heart stand still to think of it. He forgot all about Marion in the excitement of the moment; that he knew would come right, but the dead once passed can never by skill of man or power of wealth be brought back again. No, not all the regret, devotion, tenderness, misery, of which the human heart is capable, can bring back the spirit which has flown, the light which has gone out of the eyes for ever.

CHAPTER XX.

A CLUE.

WHEN Murgatroyd reached his club once more, he only stayed the cab a moment to enquire whether any letters or telegrams were awaiting him; then he drove straight on to his rooms hard by in Duke Street to dress for dinner. He was back again at the club before half-past seven, and there he lingered, although he had several tempting offers to accompany men to theatres, until bedtime.

The first thing in the morning, after he had disposed of his breakfast, he went off to Pump Chambers again, but Mr. Searchem was not there. He had been there that morning, the clerk told him, but he had gone out on important business, and had left word that he was not likely to be in before twelve o'clock. It was then a little after half-past ten : so Murgatroyd went back to the club, just to make sure that he was not wanted, and then betook himself off westward. There he fell in with a brother officer on leave, who insisted on his going in to lunch at the Albemarle.

"I really don't think I ought," said Murgatroyd, having it on his mind that he must not stay away too long from the Rag. "I am expecting a letter of considerable importance at my club, and I promised not to be away too long."

"But, my dear chap, how long is it since you were there?"

"Oh, I looked in about eleven o'clock."

"Well, you must have your food ; you must eat. I declare I won't let you off. Besides, what earthly business can you have of such importance as that?"

"Well, I have," said Murgatroyd, quietly, "and

it is of deadly importance. However, I will come and lunch with you, old chap; it's very kind of you to ask me. But won't you change your mind and come down and lunch with me in Pall Mall?"

"No, I can't; I have asked a chap to lunch with me at the Albemarle, so I can't; thanks all the same. By the bye, if you are so uneasy, why don't you send a messenger down and say that any message sent to the club is to be forwarded?"

"I might do that," said Murgatroyd, catching at the idea. "Really, it's an important matter, or I wouldn't make such a fuss about it."

"By the bye, old chap," said his friend, as they turned into the hotel, "you needn't bother to send a messenger; you can telephone, and if anything is wanted they can telephone to you here: you will know within a few minutes."

Their party was supplemented by yet another guest ere they began luncheon, and Murgatroyd was seemingly in the gayest and wildest of spirits. Nobody would have suspected that he was in the most deadly anxiety about his wife; and yet in his heart he knew that he had never been less gay in his life. Over and over again before his mind there

came a vision called up by Marion's letter, a vision of his brother Geoffrey stealing into his old father's bedroom, struggling with him for the keys of the safe, of his father's last moments, of Marion's anguish and distress of mind, thinking that he, her husband, had done this hideous wrong to the father he loved.

"Old chap," said his host, at last, "I can't tell what has come to you ; you're very unlike yourself. What's the matter?"

"The matter? Nothing," answered Laurence. "What should make you think anything was the matter, Jessamy?"

"I don't know," said Jessamy, "but you seem very unlike yourself; that's all."

"Ah, that's likely enough ; we are all unlike ourselves at times. One's self is, as a rule, a dull, morose, sordid, unlucky wight, whom nobody wants to be like."

"I don't think that can apply to you, my dear chap," said Jessamy, who had heard of his guest's recent accession to enormous wealth.

"Ah, my dear fellow, you never know which of your friends given instances apply to. Eh? what do you say, waiter?"

"Telephone message for you, sir," said the waiter, imperturbably.

"Yes? Oh, Jessamy, excuse me a moment, will you?"

After all, the message was a very simple affair, and only informed Murgatroyd that a telegram had arrived for him at the club and was being despatched to the Albemarle by special messenger.

It is not a very far cry from Pall Mall to the Albemarle and in the course of a quarter of an hour or so the same waiter brought the message to Murgatroyd. He asked permission by a look to open it. The message was brief, but what it lacked in length was made up by the startling quality of its contents. It said, "Sailed for Sydney yesterday morning. See me without delay."

Murgatroyd thrust the message into his pocket. "Jessamy," he said, "you must excuse me for leaving you. I have got a most urgent telegram from my man of business—the one I have been waiting for all the morning. You will excuse me, old chap, I know. I have a lot of business on hand just now, as you can imagine."

"My dear fellow," said Jessamy, with the utmost

complaisance, "I understand perfectly. Good luck, old chap, whatever it is."

So Murgatroyd went tearing away down the Strand again, and this time he found Mr. Searchem at home.

"I was sorry not to be here this morning when you came," he said, motioning to his client to be seated; "I was extremely busy on a case of great importance. Well, Mr. Murgatroyd, I told you that we should find the lady if she was in London. We have not found her in London, but we have her safe on board the *Orient*."

"But I shall have to go to Australia after her!"

"Not at all. If you start on Monday for Brindisi you will be able to catch her there and bring her back with you."

"Oh, by Jove, I forgot all about that. That's a splendid idea. I shall have to get foreign leave, though. Well, that must be managed. I shall have to go down to Blankshire to-night and get my chief to manage it for me; beastly difficult getting foreign leave, especially at this time of year, at such short notice too. However, I must get him to work it somehow. You are quite sure that it is my wife on board the *Orient*?"

"As sure as I am that I am sitting at this table this moment," said Mr. Searchem, emphatically. "She is booked as Nurse West, has gone in charge of a lady to Brindisi only, and I have reason to believe that the *quid pro quo* is a second-class fare to Sydney."

Murgatroyd rapped out a sharp and ugly word at the idea of his wife travelling second-class. However, it was no use thinking about that now, and he turned his attention to a more vital matter.

"You are sure I shall catch the boat at Brindisi?"

"Well, as sure as one can be of anything. The mail is run in connection with the boat, and you may be pretty sure that the mail will take care to catch the steamer. If any extraordinary accident should happen, of course that can't be helped; but I am as sure as one can be of anything in this uncertain world."

"Then I take it that my only course is to see that I get myself to Brindisi in time," said Murgatroyd. "That means that I must leave London at once. I must get back to my regiment, see my commanding officer; and, by Jove, I should have

liked to see my lawyer if I could, but that's impossible. I can't do everything, and stopping my wife from taking this journey is the most important of all. By the bye, I will write out a cheque for you now, Mr. Searchem, if you will give me a pen."

"I prefer cheques when business is satisfactorily concluded," said Mr. Searchem.

"My dear sir," said Murgatroyd, opening his cheque-book out upon the table, "you shall have your way and I will have mine. I will pay half the sum I agreed upon yesterday, and I will pay the other half when I come back to London with my wife. I must confess that I had no idea that you would be able to trace her so expeditiously as you have done. I sat at my breakfast two mornings ago wondering what on earth I should do to find her. It was like looking for the proverbial needle in the proverbial bundle of hay—and, by Jove, without knowing whether the needle was in the bundle or not!"

He wrote out the cheque, and then shook hands with Mr. Searchem warmly. Five minutes later he was bowling up the Strand again, and by five o'clock he was in the train speeding north.

He reached Blankhampton barracks soon after

ten o'clock, and found on inquiry that his colonel was dining at mess and that there were no guests. Thereupon he sent a note to his commanding officer, asking if he could see him immediately on business of the utmost importance and urgency. The colonel, recognizing the seriousness of his tone, sent word to say that he would see him in his own quarters if he would be there in five minutes. So Murgatroyd, having used the five minutes in order to wash a little of the travel dust off him, went round to the colonel's quarters and promptly made a clean breast of the entire situation to him.

"You say she's a lady?" said the colonel, who was a bachelor, and not over-sympathetic to subalterns' marriages.

"To the tips of her fingers, sir—out-and-out lady, and as good as gold. And it's just a question, sir, of my chucking up my commission or being able to go to Brindisi to stop her and bring her back."

"I don't quite understand why she has started on this wild-goose chase," said the colonel.

"Well, sir, that's just what I can't explain to you. A circumstance happened in which my wife mistook my brother for me. She had never seen

my brother, and there is a very strong likeness between us—as far as looks go. I can't explain what that circumstance was, even to you, sir; it was pretty discreditable. My brother never did anything that was a credit to anybody in his life, and I don't suppose he ever will. At all events, my wife, believing that it was I, cleared out to the other side of the world rather than have anything more to do with me. Of course, sir, it was not very flattering, and some people might say that she ought to have known me better. At the same time, it only proves to me how straight and honest a woman she is. I take it, sir, that only a good woman would have deliberately cut herself off for the sake of a matter of honour from everything that made life pleasant and prosperous to her."

"There's reason in that," said the colonel, who prided himself on the justness of his mind and the equity of his judgment. "Well, of course, as you well know, I can't give you foreign leave; but look here, I will give you a note to the general, and do you go and see him the first thing in the morning. It isn't necessary to tell him everything. I will tell him that I am perfectly satisfied with your reasons, which are most urgent ones connected with your family."

He looked at Murgatroyd and drew a blotting pad towards him.

"Thank you, sir, with all my heart," said Murgatroyd, gratefully. "I shall never forget your kindness, sir. I was really quite desperate when I came down. I have had a good deal to try me of late,"

"I am sure you have," said the colonel, sympathetically as he hastily scrawled the note. "Now, I think that you will find that General Harrison will put no difficulty in your way."

General Harrison, as it proved, had been very correctly gauged by the Colonel, and the following morning Murgatroyd went back to London, happy in the possession of a fortnight's foreign leave. He was not particularly pinched for time, being, indeed, a day in advance of the one on which he must have started to catch the boat at Brindisi. He decided, however, to start at once, so that he might be in the town when the ship arrived in port. He went round to his club for the last time, and the first thing that greeted him was the announcement from the hall porter that a letter was awaiting him.

With trembling fingers he opened it. It was from William at Murgatroyd Park.

"Honoured sir," the letter ran, "Mr. Geoffrey has ordered six bedrooms to be got ready and covers to be laid for a dozen guests to-morrow. Will you please give me instructions?"

CHAPTER XXI.

DEPENDENCE FOR EVER.

WHEN Murgatroyd grasped the meaning of the butler's letter, his first impulse was to go straight off to Murgatroyd Park and arrange matters once for all. It is an old saying that second thoughts are best, and right on the heels of his first impulse came the reflection that nothing at that moment was of such vital importance to him as to catch the *Orient* at Brindisi. He therefore despatched an answer to William for which a few words sufficed. They were, "Do nothing, wait for my return." Then he set about his preparations for the journey as if no such news had reached him.

"I suppose," his thoughts ran, as he found himself in the train speeding towards Dover, "that Geoffrey thinks he is going to quarter himself upon

me for the rest of his life. Well, Master Geoffrey has made a mistake; I mean to have as little as possible to do with him. I dare say he thinks, now that the dear old man has gone, that the embargo about keeping in Australia is at an end. Likely enough, too, he will have his knife into Marion for disturbing him when he was after the mother's diamonds: so if I have to buy Master Geoffrey off by another quarterly allowance I shall think it cheap at the price to have got rid of him. And, by Jove, I'll make it monthly: a quarterly one would give him too much rope."

The thought of Geoffrey being at Murgatroyd Park did not, however, trouble him much or for long. He was on his way to meet Marion, on his way to set everything right between them for ever. Nothing had power to annoy him seriously, nothing short of an accident which would prevent his reaching Brindisi in time; and there was no accident.

By the time the great white vessel came to an anchorage, Murgatroyd was quietly waiting a chance of boarding her. But before he could do so he saw Marion in her gray nurse's dress coming off the vessel with a tall, middle-aged lady who was

evidently in extremely delicate health. Not expecting to see him, she was not on the lookout, and was bestowing all her attention upon her companion; indeed, Murgatroyd stepped aside to let them pass, and was just in time to hear the lady say, "Are you obliged to go on to Sydney? I wish you could remain here with me."

"I am afraid I must go on," Marion's clear voice made reply; "but with your husband and your own maid you will be all right. You are so much stronger than you were when you came on board."

"Yes, I am stronger. Ah! there is Sir George."

A tall, soldierly-looking man came hurriedly up to them and greeted the lady with much affection.

"Now, my dearest," he said, "I have got a carriage waiting for you, and everything complete for your reception. How much better you are looking! And is this the nurse who came with you?"

"Yes, this is Nurse West," said the invalid lady. "I was just bewailing, George, that she must go on to Sydney; I should so like to have kept her."

"Is it not possible, nurse?" inquired the gentleman, turning to Marion.

"I am afraid quite impossible," she replied, in decided accents.

Murgatroyd stood watching them until they had reached the carriage standing but a few paces away. He saw the lady bend forward and kiss his wife upon both cheeks, then the gentleman shook hands with her, and the next moment the carriage moved off and Marion was left standing looking after it. Murgatroyd could almost hear the sigh with which she realized that she was once more alone. She stood for a moment gazing after the retreating carriage, then sharply turned round as if to return to the ship.

Then Murgatroyd stepped forward. "Marion!" he said, in a casual voice, as if he might have just seen her by accident in Bond Street.

She gave a great start at the sight of him. "Laurence! You here!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; I came overland, you know."

"But why?"

"To fetch you home again," he said, in his most casual and every-day accents.

"I cannot go."

"Oh, yes, you can. I suppose you haven't much luggage?"

"No, Laurence, I cannot go. I wrote you my feeling, and I have not altered in any respect."

"No, my dearest, but you will. I fully appreciate all that you felt: I should have felt the same myself exactly. But I didn't happen to be the person you saw juggling with my poor old dad's safe."

"Laurence! I saw you!"

"No, my dear, you didn't. You saw Geoffrey. It's the kind of thing Geoffrey does do, has always done. I have never amused myself in that way. I may be a fool, and I believe I am, but an out-and-out cad I never have been."

"It was your brother Geoffrey?"

"It was my brother Geoffrey. He isn't really like me, but we always used to be taken for each other, somehow or other. Anyway, it was not I whom you saw that night. Really, it was my brother Geoffrey. If you want actual proof of what I was doing at the time, you can have it from half a dozen officers of my regiment with whom I was dining that same evening at Blankhampton. Now, will you not go on board and put your things together, so that you may come home without further delay?"

"Is it really so, Laurie?" she exclaimed, scarcely above a whisper.

"It is really so; I give you my word of honour for it."

"Then why didn't you tell me during those three wretched days after your dear old father died? Why did you let me go away believing, thinking——"

"My dearest child, be reasonable," said Murgatroyd, regarding her with an air of extreme amusement. "If you had spoken out plainly, if you had told me you had seen me ransacking my father's safe and that you believed the shock that caused his death lay at my door, I should have known what to say in reply. But you said nothing. You said I knew why you could never be happy again. I didn't know. I couldn't think what in the world you were driving at. All I could believe was that you felt we had deceived the dear old man; and, although that was true, I could not see that because he had died we need feel any different from what we had felt all along."

"No, of course not."

"And I could not see that, whatever we felt, anything could unmarry us, could undo what we had

done more than two years ago, or that our obligations to each other were in any degree lessened by the realization of what we perhaps ought to have thought of in the first instance. Even then, I had no reason to suppose that you meant to make a bolt of it and show such an uncommonly clean pair of heels as you did."

"I didn't show a clean pair of heels," she said, smiling for the first time.

"Oh, didn't you? Well, I have had no end of bother after you. I went home——"

"To the Cottage?"

"Yes; and, of course, Simmons had seen or heard nothing of you. I went up to town, believing you had been knocked down by a cab, or run over by a train, or something horrible of that kind; and, feeling that it was utterly useless and hopeless to try to find you myself, I went to an inquiry office——"

"An inquiry office?"

"Yes, a detective office—a private agency for finding out things you can't find out for yourself; and, by Jove, the old chap was very soon on your heels. I arrived here yesterday."

He turned as if to go towards the ship, but Marion stood still, looking at him with wonder-filled eyes.

"Laurie," she said, breathlessly, "I must seem an ungrateful wretch to you. I wonder you can bring yourself to speak to me."

He turned back and slipped his hand under her arm. "My dearest child," he said, "there was never a man in this world who did not love his wife better because she had a bit of spirit to show and didn't mind showing it. If you had—believing that you saw me do the most dishonourable action possible for me—quietly sat down and lived out the rest of your life with me, I should have despised you beyond what words of mine can express. I can't kiss you here, with all these hangers-on about, but you may believe me when I say that I love you just ten times as much as I did when I parted from you at Murgatroyd Park on the day of my father's funeral. I didn't think then that it was possible I could have cared for you more: to-day I know that it is. Pray, my dearest, never have any doubt on that subject. Don't let us even speak of it again. Later on I shall hope to show you how I can value

your single-heartedness, your unselfishness, and your enormous pluck; for the present, our first duty is to get your baggage off the boat and make our way home again as quickly as possible."

"As to my baggage," returned Marion, "that is a very small matter. I have one cabin trunk, and that is all."

"Have you got nothing but this nurse's rig?"

"Oh, yes, I have got some plain clothes here. I bought them in town—ready-made things, you know; they're not bad."

Murgatroyd laughed outright. "Well, dearest," he said, "I don't think you'll have any need to patronize slop-shop; in future; but it would be better not to go to hotels in your uniform, because I could not do the invalid, even by the veriest stretch of imagination, and people might think there was something wrong about a man and a nurse travelling together. Can you get at them, or are they down in the hold, or where?"

"Oh, no; I have everything in the cabin in my one trunk. I will change before I come on shore."

"Then while you are doing that I will see the

captain and 'tell him that you are not going to make the rest of the journey."

"You—you needn't tell him why," stammered Marion, apprehensively.

"Oh, no, of course not. I will tell him that circumstances have arisen which necessitate your returning home. And, my dear child, you may bet your life that he won't take any particular notice of either of us."

As a matter of fact, the only interest that the captain took either in Murgatroyd or in Nurse West was to intimate promptly that he would be unable to refund the passage-money that had been paid for the lady, and when Murgatroyd accepted his fiat as a matter of course, he asked him to have a whiskey and soda, and they parted the best of friends.

"And if you please, madam," said Murgatroyd to Marion, as they went into the hotel, "let this be your last independent bit of business for some time to come."

"I am quite willing," she returned, with charming penitence, "to let it be my last for good and all."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MASTER OF MURGATROYD PARK.

"Now let us see," said Murgatroyd to Marion, when they had enjoyed a comfortable meal together. "I have six days' foreign leave left; I propose that we get on to Paris without delay and stay there until the last minute. Then you can buy yourself some proper gowns and such-like things. Poor little woman, you've had little enough in that way since you cast in your lot with mine, and now that you haven't to think of money you may as well indulge yourself in a few smart frocks, the smarter the better. There's nothing like going to the fountain-head for everything—Paris for silk frocks, and a good London tailor for cloth ones."

It was not until they reached Paris that Murgatroyd remembered that he must spare a day to run down to Murgatroyd Park and settle matters with his brother.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, suddenly, the first morning at breakfast, "I clean forgot about Geoffrey!"

"What about Geoffrey?" asked Marion.

"Well, he's at home."

"At the Park?"

"Yes, at the Park. I had a letter from poor old William, who has been with the governor for five-and-twenty years and knows everything inside out, saying that Geoffrey was there, and asking for instructions. I suppose Geoffrey means to quarter himself upon me for the rest of my natural life."

"And you?" asked Marion, with rather a scared look.

"I simply don't intend to have Geoffrey quartered upon me, that's all. I must go down and bundle my fine gentleman out. I don't see what else I can do."

"Can he stay there?"

"Well, he can if he's a mind to, unless I turn him out. He has impudence enough for anything, and Geoffrey's impudence is patent leather, my dear."

"Then we must go back a day earlier?"

"I think we ought to do so. I shall not be able to get leave again just yet, and it is a matter which ought to be settled. I think we will arrange to go back on Wednesday, and you can have a few hours for shopping in London, while I run down to the Park and settle things there."

"Then you don't want me to come down to the Park with you?"

"Oh, no, I think not; indeed, I think it will be better if you don't, my hands will be so much more free. You see, they don't know yet that we are married. I shall tell William and I shall tell Mr. Blenkinsop. You don't want to go, do you?"

"Oh, dear, no. I hope I shall never meet that brother of yours; it would be most painful to me to see him. Laurie," she went on, resting her elbows on the table and leaning her pretty chin upon her clasped hands, "tell me, what could he want in that safe? Money?"

"If he found any. I think he was on the prowl after anything he could get hold of; he is the kind of person that nothing would come amiss to. I believe his principal object was my mother's diamonds."

"Oh! Are they kept there?"

"Yes; they were in one of those inner compartments."

"And were they all right?"

"Oh, yes, they were all right. I went over the list with Mr. Blenkinsop before I left the Park. Oh, he didn't get them; if he had we should never

have seen them again. One hears pretty often of saving one's bacon, but, by Jove, my dear, you've saved your diamonds."

Their brief sojourn in Paris was not interesting from the story-teller's point of view. They spent a great deal of money—at least Marion did—and Murgatroyd patiently trotted round all the sights, most of which he was seeing for the first time, as in previous visits to Paris he had not troubled about the Hôtel des Invalides, the Louvre, or any of the other sights of the place.

On the day agreed between them they crossed over to England, and Murgatroyd, after wiring to William to send to the station to meet him, went straight off to Murgatroyd Park. Somewhat to his surprise, William himself came with the carriage.

"Hullo, William! Is that you?" said Murgatroyd, in surprise.

"I thought, Mr. Laurence, that I had better come, so as to get a word or two with you in private before you reached the house," said William, in mysteriously confidential tones.

"All right; get in, and we will talk it over on the way home. So Mr. Geoffrey has taken possession?"

"Taken possession, Mr. Laurence!" said the butler, spreading out his hands and looking very much like an antiquated owl in the dim light of the carriage. "Taken possession, sir! Anybody would imagine that poor master had left the Park to Mr. Geoffrey instead of to yourself. He comes in, and he says, 'William, get me the blue room ready.' 'The blue room?' says I; 'Mr. Laurence'—begging your pardon, Mr. Murgatroyd, that was what I said—'Mr. Laurence he ain't here, sir.' 'I didn't ask you whether Mr. Laurence was here,' says Mr. Geoffrey, quite cool; 'I said get me the blue room ready, and, by God, if you don't get it ready, you old sinner, I'll wring your neck for you.' So what could I do, Mr. Laurence?"

Laurence Murgatroyd laughed. "Well, William, I really don't see what else you could do. So you had the blue room got ready; and then——?"

"Well, then Mr. Geoffrey he orders dinner, and he says to me, 'William,' he says, 'this is poor tittle to give me my first night at home; have up a bottle of that Veuve Clicquot.' I—I demurred at this," said William, deprecatingly, "and Mr. Geoffrey he says, 'You old sinner,' he says, 'do you

want it all for your own drinking? Bring me up a bottle this minute, or I'll break your thick old skull for you.' What could I do, Mr. Laurence? And when he had finished the Clicquot, he says, 'Upon my soul,' he says, 'you've got very stingy here all at once. Bring me up a bottle of Château Lafitte.' Well, now, Mr. Laurence," William went on, rubbing his hands together and looking appealingly at Murgatroyd, "I did grudge the bottle of Château Lafitte on the top of the bottle of Veuve Clicquot, that I did."

"Yes, by Jove, I expect you did! I should have thought Fin Champagne would have been more in my brother's way! And then?"

"Well, then, the next morning he says, 'I'm going to have some friends to dinner to-morrow night.' 'You're going to give a dinner-party, Mr. Geoffrey?' said I. 'Yes,' says he, 'and you had better lay covers for a dozen; and tell the women to get six bedrooms ready.' I wrote to you, Mr. Laurence, and I had had your wire, 'Do nothing,' so I felt helpless-like: so I goes down to Mrs. Robinson and I tells her what's up. And she, poor old lady, she just sits down and she dodders. So I

says to her, ‘Well, Mrs. Robinson, you ain’t fit to do it, ma’am; you leave it to cook and me, and we’ll see that there’s something to eat. Something to eat, Mr. Lawrence! When Mr. Geoffrey comes in at lunch-time he says, ‘Bring me the menu of the dinner’ for to-morrow night.’ You might have knocked me down with a feather, Mr. Murgatroyd; I hadn’t got no menu. But I says, ‘Yes, sir,’ and I went down to cook, and I says, ‘Cook,’ I says, ‘have you got the menu for Mr. Geoffrey?’ And cook she says something about a rum start, and all the others thought it a rum start, and so did I. But, Mr. Laurence, if you’d seen the company as come to eat that there dinner! Well, sir, they was enough to make the poor master turn in his grave. I never see such a set in all my life. There was the barmaid from the ‘King’s Head’ at Burghley. In general they have decent barmaids at the ‘King’s Head’; I don’t know where they picked up this beauty from. There was the head groom from Lord Oakley’s, and all the rest; upon my word, Mr. Laurence, I don’t know where they came from. I never see such goings-on in our dining-room afore. They ate with their knives——”

"Oh, there are plenty of people who do that," put in Laurence, in a quizzical tone.

"Perhaps they do, but not in our dining-room. They called for their wine in season and out of season; they had liqueurs after the fish; and I wonder they didn't all die when they got home."

"I suppose they would if you had had your will, William?"

"Maybe they would, sir. Anyway, there's not a horse in the stable that's not about done for; Rogers is only hanging on till you come back and settle things one way or another; Mrs. Robinson have took to her bed, and lies there moaning like a cat out on the tiles; and the hole in the cellar—well, Mr. Laurence——"

"Oh, well, William, that can soon be repaired; that's not a great matter. Of course my brother really has no right to come and inflict himself on my house in this way, and I shall take care to put a stop to it, but for the rest—I don't want to have a scene. You can let the others know that I shall make it up to them. By the bye, William," said Murgatroyd, as they were nearing the Park, "does Mr. Geoffrey know that I am coming?"

"No, sir, I did not mention it," said William. "I thought it would be better that you should come in unawares and see how things really are."

If he had spoken out his own real thoughts he would have said "come and catch him red-handed." However, he dressed up the unpalatable sentence somewhat, and then the brougham drew up at the principal entrance. A scared young footman opened the door for them, and Murgatroyd walked quietly into the house.

He had no need to ask where his brother was. A tell-tale odour of tobacco and the sound of much laughter proceeding from the billiard-room made him turn his steps immediately in that direction. Without saying a word, he threw open the door and walked in. The sight that met his eyes was astonishing enough. His brother Geoffrey was leaning over the billiard table in the act of making a stroke ; several other men of singularly unprepossessing appearance were standing or lounging in various attitudes round the room. At the moment of his entrance Geoffrey did not perceive his brother. Then he stopped short in his stroke, the laugh froze upon his lips, and he slowly straightened himself

into a standing position. For a moment or two the brothers stood and looked at each other in silence.

"May I ask," said Murgatroyd, at last, in cold and cutting accents, "what you are doing here, and who are these people?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

JOCKEYED !

WHEN Murgatroyd put that question to his brother, "What are you doing here, and who are these people?" a silence fell upon the room which was positively ghastly. At last Geoffrey Murgatroyd spoke.

"I am here," he said thickly, "in the exercise of my rights."

"Your rights!" echoed Laurence. "Indeed? And what are your rights? I was under the impression that this house belonged to me—that I was master here. No, pray don't go," he said to the onlookers, who were one and all edging to the door; "my brother would doubtless like you to remain for the moment. Since when," turning to Geoffrey, "did you acquire the right to fill my house with guests, to give your orders to my

servants, to drink my wines, and make yourself thoroughly at home here?"

"I am not going to tell you before all these," said Geoffrey, still speaking in a thick, uncertain voice. "I have the right to stay here, to be here, to look on this house as my own, and I think, when I have had ten minutes' talk with you, you will admit as much."

"I think not," said Laurence, in decided, metallic accents. "This is not the first time within the last month that you have come uninvited to this house—that you came against its master's wish and decision—but I think it will be the last."

"Clear out!" said Geoffrey sulkily to his companions.

The uncomfortable guests were gone as in the twinkling of an eye. As the door closed behind the last of them, Laurence Murgatroyd turned once more to his brother.

"Now," he said, "what have you to say for yourself?"

"Perhaps more," sneered Geoffrey, "than you will find palatable."

"I think not. Nothing that such a one as you

could say could in any wise affect me or even annoy me. I give you half an hour to clear out of this house for good and all. If you are not gone in that time, I shall put you out."

"I don't think you will."

"Don't you? Well, I am sure of it."

"Do you mean it?" asked Geoffrey.

"I do, every word of it."

"You won't when you have heard all that I have got to say."

"Then say it. What have you got up your sleeve? Something villainous, I'll be bound."

"Well, first and foremost," said Geoffrey, proping himself against the edge of the billiard-table, "I have got the motive that actuates most of us, the desire to look after number one; and while you've been swaggering about with your regiment, cutting a dash with the old man's money—old brute that he was—I've been looking after my own interests."

"Make yourself clearer," said Murgatroyd.

"I will. Our respected progenitor made a will——"

"He made several," corrected Laurence.

"One by which he left me four hundred pounds

a year for life, payable in monthly instalments—in monthly instalments, indeed!”

“It was a good deal more than you deserved,” said Laurence, deliberately.

“That’s as may be. It was not as much as my right. Why should one son have everything and the other a mere pittance?”

“Because I stayed with my father and was at one with him always. Because I was a good son and you were a blackguard. Because I never gave him half an hour’s real anxiety in my life, and you never gave him anything else. Because he despised you and was ashamed of you, blushed for you. Because he knew that if he left you more than an allowance you would make ducks and drakes of it. Because he knew that you would fill your house, as you have filled my house to-day, with people who were a disgrace to you. Because he knew you were a bad lot, a thorough bad lot. That was why, Geoffrey Murgatroyd.”

“Yes, it’s all very pretty,” said Geoffrey, with a sneer, “but the governor made another will—a will by which you didn’t come off quite so well—a will by which you only took Murgatroyd Park on a certain condition: eh?”

“ Well ? ”

“ Well, that will fell into my possession ”

“ That is a lie,” said Murgatroyd, hotly. “ If that will is in your possession you stole it : so to your other distinguished characteristics you can add that of thief, sir.”

“ Yes, I can add that of thief. I stole it. I came to try and coax the old brute into a more amiable frame of mind ; by Jove, I even promised reformation and impossible things of that kind ! He wouldn't hear me. He told me I was no son of his, that I was a blackguard and a scoundrel, and the Lord knows what besides—still, things I had heard fifty times before——”

“ And I should think,” said Laurence, “ the kind of thing you would be likely to hear fifty times again—you, a man who stole into an old man's sick-room, a dying man's room, and did not hesitate to open his private safe like a common thief in the night ! I thought when I heard that you had done it that you were after our mother's diamonds—not worse. So you got the will, did you ? ”

“ I did. It leaves me four hundred pounds a year. Four hundred a year don't suit my book ; it

is a mere pittance. I've a right to more. I intend to have more. I took it, intending to destroy it, knowing that you would get the estate, and thinking that I should get my share of the personalty. Then that cursed old fool Blenkinsop turns up another rotten will and baulks me, by Jove—baulks me clean."

"Yes," murmured Murgatroyd, "Providence has a little way of frustrating evil designs sometimes."

"Providence! Bah! I don't want any of that cant."

"Fortunately," said Laurence, deliberately, "you are not the one who either pays the piper or sets the tune in this house, and you never will be."

"I don't know so much about that. I intend to set a tune to you to-day, my affectionate brother, that you will dance to; you will dance to it, or I'm much mistaken."

"Then," said Murgatroyd, "I can answer for it that you are much mistaken, for dance to a tune of yours, Geoffrey, I never will. You destroyed my father's will? That means seven years."

"It does; or, rather, it would if I had destroyed it. As a matter of fact, I have got it in my

possession now. Now, to put the matter plain and square, it doesn't suit me to live on four hundred a year, when I know there's forty thousand a year rolling into your coffers. It's too much of a one-sided bargain for me, Laurence, and the question is: How shall we share it?"

"Share it? Share what?"

"The estate. I have taken the risk, and I'm quite willing to make myself agreeable by taking the share that you don't want, but one or the other I mean to have. The only question is, which?"

"You want me," said Laurence, "to make a bargain with you for the suppression of the will which you stole?"

"That's about it," answered Geoffrey.

"Then I absolutely refuse to do anything of the kind; I refuse to make any terms with you."

"You do?"

"I do."

"And do you realize what you are saying? It's all one to me—I get my four hundred a year clear for the rest of my life by either will—but so sure as you refuse me, Laurence, that will—the one in my possession—the one leaving everything to you

on a condition which would be very hard to fill—finds its way straight to that old fool Blenkinsop.”

“Let it find its way to Blenkinsop; it won’t find its way there too soon.”

“Do you know what is in it?”

“Yes, I know what is in it.”

“You know the condition?”

“I know the condition.”

“Twenty thousand pounds?”

“Yes, twenty thousand pounds. I do more than refuse you. I refuse to accept any dishonourable bargain at your hands. I believed that our father had destroyed that will, considering it unjust. It seems that you had stolen it. So, let the will stand. Send it at once to Mr. Blenkinsop; he will know what to do with it better than I. As for your suggestion that I should stoop to buy you off, you ought to have known me better. Not for all the money in the world would I sell myself into the bondage of such a thing as you are. Now, if I know anything of the terms of that will, this house for two years from my father’s death is mine. Clear out of it, or, by the Lord above us, I’ll break your neck.”

For a moment Geoffrey Murgatroyd stood gazing incredulously at his brother.

“Laurence,” he said, “do you mean it?”

“I mean it.” And he pointed silently to the door.

Geoffrey staggered out into the great entrance hall. His scheme had failed; the bombshell had fallen flat; the *dénouement* had proved pointless; he himself was left in such a state of blank consternation that only three words found their way to his whitened lips. “Jockeyed, by God!” he muttered.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MR. BLENKINSOP TO THE RESCUE.

LAURENCE MURGATROYD was a man in whom action was always remarkably rapid. It was very seldom that he cared to think out a situation, and on that occasion, when he had seen his brother out of the room, and knew that he was gone out of the house, he did not hesitate for the space of five minutes as to what would be his best plan to follow. He rang the bell sharply.

“Oh, William,” he said, when the servant came,

"I wish that you would order me the brougham, or a dog-cart if there is not a fast horse fit to go. I must go into Burghley immediately."

"Will you dine here to-night, sir?"

"Upon my word I don't know. No, I think not. I must see Mr. Blinkinsop on business without delay. I may have to follow him home: in that case he will be sure to give me some dinner. Has my brother gone?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Geoffrey have gone, and he have told James to put his things together and take them to the 'Rose and Crown' at Burghley."

"Very good. They can go in by cart, I suppose; I can wait for nothing. I must see Mr. Blinkinsop immediately."

In a quarter of an hour or so Laurence Murgatroyd was tearing down the avenue, going towards Burghley as fast as the best horse in the stables could carry him. When he reached the lawyer's office he found that Mr. Blinkinsop had gone home.

"You think he has gone home?" he asked of the clerk, who was just stamping the letters for the day. "I am as sure of it, sir, as I well can be of anything," the young man replied. "Mr. Blinkinsop

said to me, 'Well, I shall be getting home now.' I think if you go out to Heatherdene you will find him."

When Laurence Murgatroyd reached Heatherdene, however, Mr. Blenkinsop had not yet returned.

"I want to see him on most important business," he explained to the man who answered the door.

"Perhaps Miss Blenkinsop could tell you where the master is," the man suggested. "I believe he is expected home to dinner, sir."

"Well, ask Miss Blenkinsop. I must see your master to-night."

Thereupon the servant went in search of his mistress, who presently came—a tall, angular lady, some years older than her brother, who was himself quite an elderly man.

"You want to see my brother on business, Mr. Murgatroyd?"

"On most important business, Miss Susanna," said Murgatroyd, promptly reverting into the ways of his boyhood.

"Well, really, I think the best thing will be for you to wait. He will be back by a quarter past seven for certain. I believe, you know, that he

always looks in at the club. He says to look at the papers—fiddle! I believe for the sake of the gossip. Will you stay and take pot-luck with us? Then you can talk over your business with my brother afterwards without spoiling the dinner of either of you.”

“Oh, thank you; you are most lawfully kind. Indeed, my business is most important, or I would not have come at this unearthly hour.”

“I don’t call it an unearthly hour myself,” said Miss Blinkinsop; “indeed, quite the contrary. There’s a good dinner going, and you may as well help to eat it as go back to the Park for your own.”

So Murgatroyd followed the old lady into the spacious drawing-room, and sat down with what patience he could to await the coming of his father’s old friend and legal adviser. He came at last, ten minutes before the hour fixed for dinner, and was full of surprise when he found who was awaiting him.

“My dear Laurence! I hope you have no bad news?”

“Some very disconcerting news, Mr. Blinkinsop,” said Laurence, who was in no mood to let his errand leak out by degrees.

Then he told him everything.

"I told him at once that he was to send the will to you, that I absolutely refused to connive at suppressing it. For the sake of my father's name you will connive so far that you will seem to find it?" he said, entreatingly.

"By way of sparing Geoffrey! I don't see why Geoffrey should be spared," said Mr. Blenkinsop, dryly. "However, that's a simple matter enough. The question is, Laurence, that all this will considerably alter your position. You will have to look out for that heiress after all."

"It's no use my looking out for that heiress, Mr. Blenkinsop," said Laurence, quietly. "I have settled that condition."

"What do you mean?"

Laurence smiled. "My dear sir," he said, "I have been married for more than two years."

"The deuce you have! Then that was why none of those young ladies took your fancy?"

"Well, yes, it was."

"I see. Oh! And she has no money?"

"Not a penny."

"Dear, dear! that's very bad. Is she——?"

"Oh, she's all right : she's a lady."

"I need hardly ask if she's pretty ?"

"Pretty ? You know her."

"I know her ?"

"Yes. She came to nurse my father when he was so ill."

"Good heavens ! You don't mean it ! That was your wife ?"

"Yes, Mr. Blinkinsop, that is my wife."

It was not often that the grave old lawyer did anything thoroughly modern, but his astonishment at Murgatroyd's news was so great that he was obliged to give vent to his feelings by a long low whistle.

"Oh ! that's the way the cat jumps ! So this is a worse blow to you than even the scamp Geoffrey dreamed of ?"

"I am afraid it is. However, I suppose I shall have the two years' income, and we must make out on that. It won't be starvation."

"I must think," said the old lawyer, who, strange to say, was one of those persons who have a rooted objection to large legacies being left to any sort of institution. "I must think, Laurence. Let us have our dinner. Don't discuss this before my sister ;

ladies are not always as reticent as might be. I must think. We will have a glass of my '47 port—excellent wine; I don't often indulge in it, but when I want to think hard I open a bottle. I hope the dinner is very good to-night: there's nothing like a good dinner and a glass of sound wine for showing the way out of a difficult situation. Remember, not a word to Miss Blenkinsop."

Murgatroyd promised a complete silence, and followed his genial old host into the dining room, feeling as if everything was going to work into a smooth and harmonious whole.

It was not until Miss Blenkinsop had betaken herself to her own place, and her brother was enjoying his third glass of the celebrated '47, that any solution appeared to the mystery of Murgatroyd's present situation. Then he pushed the bottle over and bade Laurence help himself.

"It won't hurt you, my boy; there's not a headache in it."

"You've got an idea, Mr. Blenkinsop," said Laurence, eyeing the elder man.

"Yes, yes, I have an idea. You see, Laurence, my dear boy, you are my godson.

"I believe I am. I do not remember the actual occasion, but I have always heard so," said Laurence.

"Oh, I can vouch for it. I promised and vowed all sorts of things in your name, and up to the present time, beyond having presented you with the usual spoon and fork and pap-basin, I have really done nothing for you—nothing at all. Now, when your father made that extraordinary will the other day—the will which, by the bye, I did everything I could to prevent his making, the will that Nurse Marion—your wife, by Jove!—refused to sign——"

"Did she, though?"

"Yes. I made a new will, in which I left a good share of my property to you."

"Oh, Mr. Blinkinsop!"

"Well, you needn't say, 'Oh Mr. Blinkinsop!' in that tone, Laurence; I didn't intend you to have it until I had quite done with it. I have left my sister the whole of my property for her life, and it is to revert to you at her death. I was practically bound to do something with it. I am fairly well off—not rich like your father, no, but I should cut up

very tidily. 'Yes, I've been thinking, this evening, that I must be worth a hundred and twenty thousand pounds, and if it should please the Almighty to take me before my sister, who is six or seven years older than I am—I don't tell everybody that, you know; ladies don't like these little things mentioned; ladies have a very strong objection—most ladies—particularly when they are getting on—and if it should please the Almighty to take me before my sister, and I were to leave her the income of a sum of a hundred thousand pounds, or near to it, she would not miss any of the luxuries which she has enjoyed as my companion and house-keeper. Then if I was to make your charming little wife—whom you must have married from a right and proper motive, the only motive for which marriages should be made—that is not my legal opinion, Laurence, that is my godfatherly opinion—if I were to make a free gift of the necessary twenty thousand pounds to your wife, there would be no question of any of my old friend's property going where I am quite sure in his right mind—I don't mean his sane mind exactly, but in his moments of calm and rational consideration—he

would greatly regret that it should go. You see, Laurence," putting up his hand to stop the torrent of thanks which had crowded to Murgatroyd's lips, "the will does not specify that the money shall come from the lady's father; it distinctly says, 'a lady possessed of not less than twenty thousand pounds.' As for that scamp Geoffrey, I really feel quite sorry that your natural pride in your father's name prevents you from getting him a little term of residence in a place where his morals would be very well looked after, and where he would be out of the way of temptation for some little time to come. However, it is very sad to punish the innocent for the guilty, and I am afraid we must let Geoffrey go this time."

"Mr. Blinkinsop," said Laurence, in a voice that was husky with emotion, "I don't know what to say to you. You've always been good to me, and I am sure, if my dear old dad could know what you have done, he would be very grateful to you. At least I know I am."

"I don't know about your father; he might think I was interfering in somebody else's business," said Mr. Blinkinsop. "However, he made the

condition, and, to tell you the truth, Laurence, I purposely left a loophole by which you could, if you wanted to marry some dowerless lady, do so without finding yourself bereft of your natural and legitimate inheritance. Now don't say a word, my dear boy; remember that godfathers have privileges when they have neither chick nor child of their own. Not another word. Another glass of '47, my dear boy, and let us drink health, happiness, and prosperity to Mrs. Murgatroyd of Murgatroyd Park."

It was something less than a year after this that Mr. Blenkinsop rose from his seat at Marion Murgatroyd's left hand and proposed a health.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "let me ask you, when your glasses are charged, to drink a bumper to the health of John Brandon Murgatroyd, the little heir to this house, whom to-day we saw made a member of Holy Church, like his father before him—my godchild."

THE END.